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The role of Western experts in Russian political talk shows

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the role of Western expert figures in Russian political talk shows during the first three and a half years following the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Political talk shows, are an essential tool in the hands of the Putin-regime, used to convey ideological messages to domestic audiences in an entertaining and engaging way (Tolz and Teper, 2018). Earlier research documented that the Russian media space is carefully orchestrated (Pomerantsev, 2015; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014) and that Russian propaganda uses TV shows to shape public opinion about the West (Knobel, 2020). While Russian disinformation is widely studied within the Western academic community, Russian domestic disinformation about the West often remains disregarded. These disinformation campaigns often use 'foreign experts' who are presented as renowned experts from abroad, whose narratives tend to coincide with those of the Kremlin. Investigative journalistic pieces uncovered numerous Western experts of this kind, yet this phenomenon lacks academic research ('Von Beruf Putin-Fan: Russlands "West-Journalisten"', 2022).

While researchers analysed certain Russian talk-show episodes earlier, their focus was not on the Western experts'¹ performances and narratives. Furthermore, their sample sizes were small, which allowed them to carry out in-depth analysis of singular episodes, but not presenting the big picture, the phenomenon of Western experts featured in Russian political talk shows. This dissertation does exactly that. It observes the entire phenomenon, and traces how these Western experts legitimate, normalize and justify the Kremlin's strategic narratives. The sample size is large enough to draw conclusions and identify patterns, as the coverage of 14 key events from the first 42 months of the full-scale invasion, altogether 114 days is analysed.

Applying the strategic narrative concept of Lawrence Freedman (1996) in the dissertation, the strategic narratives used by the Kremlin's official talking heads were reconstructed, and the narratives used by the identified Western experts were compared to them. The

¹ *Irrespective of their background, personal standing or integrity, I identify these people as "experts" in this work, due to the fact they appear in front of the Russian viewers in that capacity. It is the image projected about them, and not necessarily reality that matters.*

research found that their performances do underpin the Kremlin's strategic narratives and reinforce the Kremlin's anti-Western ideological messages for Russian domestic audiences. Given that Russia is going to stay a permanent threat to Europe's security, understanding and tracing the way the Kremlin's ideology impacts Russian domestic audiences is of key importance.

New scientific results

- 1) A new dataset was created listing the Western experts featured in three of the most watched Russian political talk shows, in the coverages centred around the key events of the first 42 months of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The dataset makes the frequency of appearances comparable.
- 2) A new typology of Western experts appearing in Russian political talk shows was created, based on the in-depth analysis of their performance in a chosen episode of each of them. The typology shows 5 typical characters based on how the expert behaves, acts and communicates, and how the presenter and other guests treat them. The five distinct categories reinforce the Kremlin's messages to Russian domestic audiences in different ways.
- 3) The Kremlin's strategic narratives voiced in three of the most watched Russian political talk shows of the full-scale invasion's first 42 months were reconstructed, based on the speeches of Maria Zakharova (Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, as regularly mentioned the official representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Dmitry Peskov (Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation), Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation), and Margarita Simonyan (Editor-in-Chief of RT).
- 4) The textual corpus of 114 days of talk show episodes featuring were created and made publicly available for scholars interested in continuing the research. (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aabqlqwGCT_nT6azGi-q-eEaP-mwmcDi?usp=drive_link)
- 5) The results supported the statements of Peter Pomerantsev (2015) on a large sample, who described how performances in Russian state media are carefully coordinated and orchestrated to convey the Kremlin's ideology the most effectively (Pomerantsev, 2015).

- 6) The thesis supports and further develops the work of Kecheng Fang (2022), who described how authoritarian countries' centrally controlled media utilizes foreign experts to legitimise the ruling party and its policies for domestic audiences, regarding China. This work validated on a large sample that Russia does practice this too, but also develops further Fang's concept, introducing the term *performative Westernness* as it identifies a set of expert characters used for the same purpose, in whose case even their Westernness is performative, as they can be rather understood as "originally Russians". This means that the identified group consists of people born and raised in the Soviet Union or Russia, being of Russian mother tongue, who emigrated or spent years abroad as an adult, after which they either relocated to Russia or stayed abroad, but they are constantly labelled by the TV programmes as experts from the given Western country ("Journalist from Germany").
- 7) The research demonstrates that the main role of Western experts in Russian political talk shows is threefold with regard to the Kremlin's strategic narratives. They *normalise* them, with often outperforming them in smearing the West (for instance, while the Kremlin's official speakers only accused the West of supporting Nazis in Ukraine, Western experts repeatedly accused the West of being Nazi itself). In this comparison, the Kremlin's narrative can even seem restrained and moderate in the eyes of Russian domestic audiences. They *legitimise* them, while not challenging the Kremlin's strategic narratives promoted by others, only in exceptional cases, when it is part of the performance too. In these cases, the "challenger" is spectacularly win over, discrediting their pronounced stance in the eyes of the audience, reinforcing that the challenged strategic narrative of the Kremlin prevailed, and was right. They *amplify* them, by repeating them a lot more than the Kremlin's official speakers and giving the claims extra credibility by their affiliation and title too. As an example, Western experts criticized and smeared Western media significantly more than the Kremlin's official speakers did in the examined episodes, and the fact that 5 out of 9 is positioned as "journalist" besides being "Western" lends extra credibility to their criticism in the eyes of their audiences.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whereas Russian disinformation abroad increasingly receives attention in the academic community, state-coordinated disinformation about the West targeting Russian domestic audiences is still an under-researched topic. These disinformation campaigns often use foreign expert figures who are presented as renowned experts from abroad, whose narratives tend to closely coincide with those of the Kremlin. Investigative journalistic pieces uncovered numerous Western experts of this kind, yet this phenomenon lacks academic research. It is documented how the Russian media space is carefully orchestrated (Pomerantsev, 2015; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014) and how Russian propaganda uses TV shows to shape public opinion about the West (Knobel, 2020), this dissertation explores the phenomenon of Western experts disseminating disinformation about the West in Russian political talk shows.

The two research questions which the dissertation answers are the following:

- 1) *Who are the Western experts in Russian political talk shows?*
- 2) *How do they convey the Kremlin's strategic narratives to Russian domestic audiences?*

To build up the theoretical background for the answers to these questions, the existing scholarly literature is collected and analysed. The literature review looks at the role of experts in media in general. Then, the literature on the specificities of the Russian media space is collected, including propaganda and state-controlled disinformation, and earlier works on foreign expert figures appearing in Russian media. The literature on the chosen concept covers that of the strategic narrative framework, which is currently widely used for studying Russian disinformation and propaganda both within Russia's borders and beyond, is also presented. Following this, the literature on what the West meant for Russia in history, and today is showcased, along with what "the West" means for contemporary Russia. This is key to understand the references and importance of current anti-Western narratives in Russia. The final part of the literature review collects the available scholarly works on Russian political talk shows.

To answer the first research question and identify Western experts in Russian political talk shows, an in-depth query was conducted to map Western experts who are vocal in the Russian media in general. According to prior experience, foreign experts appearing in Russian media are titled by their nationality and profession (for instance, “American journalist”). Therefore, a list was created of 36 Western nationalities multiplied by 8 professions, which were assumed to typically asked to comment foreign policy related subjects. In addition, certain titles were also given to the list with relevance to NATO, as this Western organization is often a target of Russian anti-Western narratives. This resulted in 291 combinations of these keywords (see Annex 1). As three of the most watched Russian political talk show’s coverage was chosen for analysis, these 291 combinations were run in Russia’s most used search engine Yandex, with each of the three talk shows (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 60 Minutes, Time Will Tell). Screening the first three pages of results for the 873 searches, a preliminary pool of expert figures was created. Then the names from this preliminary pool were searched for in the online archive of War of Words² filtering to the mentioned three talk shows and the examined period of 24 February 2022-24 August 2025. This resulted in 11 Western experts.

The selected three political talk shows are aired each workday, some with special editions even on weekends, some with multiple, hours-long episodes per day, resulting in a gigantic quantity of data. For the goals of this dissertation, taking into consideration both the constraints on time and available software, the amount of data had to be filtered and made manageable. For this reason, 14 key events were identified from the course of the first 3 and a half years of the invasion, where the assumption was that Western experts would be called in the talk show studios to comment them. From the 14 events, the dates of 8 were foreseen by the general public (such as elections in major Western countries, or NATO summits), hence, assuming that the programme would start to frame the event or to the given events, the coverage of 5 days before, the coverage on the day of the event, and 5 days after were analysed. For the 6 events unforeseen by the general public (such as the breach of the Kakhovka dam, or the uncovering of the Bucha massacre), the coverage of the day when the event happened, and the following 5 days was taken. Discounting a few days of overlaps in the periods centred around the 14 key events, the

²War of Words, <https://theworldwar-dev.azurewebsites.net/> accessed on 29.10.2025

coverage of 114 days was examined. On the examined 114 days, 9 of the 11 previously identified Western experts were featured in the three chosen political talk shows, hence, in the following, their role was analysed. Collecting the publicly available information on them, their brief professional biographies were written.

To address the second research question, and explore, how do they convey the strategic narratives of the Kremlin, first, their *public persona*, the way they act on stage and how they are treated by the presenters and guests was analysed. For each of the 9 Western experts, their performance in one episode was analysed in-depth. Based on this analysis, 5 categories were established, which represent the roles the Western expert played in the dynamics of the shows. Each of the roles played underpinned the Kremlin's anti-Western messages, in slightly varying ways. To analyse, to what extent did the narratives used by the Western experts across the 114 examined days underpin and reinforce the Kremlin's strategic narratives, first the latter ones were reconstructed. Four talking heads were chosen, whose job is to further the Kremlin's agenda and convey its messages: Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation), Dmitry Peskov (Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation), Maria Zakharova (Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation) and Margarita Simonyan, (Editor-in Chief of RT). To make the comparison as feasible as possible, and guarantee that the examined period and the performances' target audiences were the same, the exact same 114 days and the exact same three political talk shows were taken. In both cases, the transcripts were obtained using the online archive War of Words, in English language, as according to my prior experience the NVivo software used for further coding does not handle Cyrillic sources reliably. The textual corpus was inductively, thematically coded. A codebook was created, and the Kremlin's 9 strategic narratives were reconstructed. Then the textual corpus of the coverage of 114 days, produced by the 9 identified Western figures was thematically coded using the same codebook, and the narratives were reconstructed in this case as well.

The comparison has shown that the narratives of the Western experts aligned with the Kremlin's strategic narratives, justified, normalized and amplified them. Their primary role is to reinforce anti-Western messages and discredit the West in the eyes of Russian audiences which they clearly outperform the Kremlin's official talking heads in the observed political talk-shows. The open challenging of any of the Kremlin's strategic

narratives is exceptional on their side, and if it happens, it is part of the performance at the end of which the challenger is dominated, won over and hence, their stance is discredited in the eyes of the audience.

This thesis argues that Western experts represent a symbolic resource for the highly centralised information space of Russia. What makes them important for the regime is not only their expertise or presumed credibility, but the performative externality which accompanies their appearance. By staging Western figures as legitimate voices who come from outside the Russian political and information system, the TV can externalise the authority of regime narratives crafted domestically, and can make its political claims seem independently confirmed, normalized and objectively established. This creates a paradoxical situation, where the ostensibly external voices are incorporated into a highly controlled domestic information environment, and where their presence and voice are constructed as external to the regime, but functions as a component of an internal legitimisation practice. The thesis, therefore, contributes to the works mapping and describing the media presence of foreign experts in the media spaces of authoritarian countries, and the manufacturing of the appearance of independent, external validation for their domestic audiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The role of experts in media

2.1.1 Expertise

To properly define who is an ‘expert’, first, the nature and definition of ‘expertise’ should be established. Marie-Line Germain and Carlos Enrique Ruiz (2009) offered the following definition for expertise which they claim valid for Europe and the US: it is the combination of knowledge, experience and skills of a person in a given domain (Germain and Enrique Ruiz, 2009). It involves constant improvement over time to achieve superior performance on some meaningful measure (Goodyear, Wampold and Lichtenberg, 2017).

Also, expertise can be assessed based on numerous criteria, including performance, cognitive processing, client outcomes, experience, personal and relational qualities, credentials, reputation, and self-assessment (Hill *et al.*, 2017).

Bruce D. Weinstein (1993) has put the experts into two categories. Those, whose expertise is a function of what they *know*, possess epistemic expertise, which can enable them to give solid explanations for a variety of propositions in a domain. Those, whose expertise stems from what they *do*, bear performative expertise, which is the ability to perform a skill successfully, adhering to the rules of a discipline. He found it legitimate for epistemic and performative experts to legitimately disagree with each other, and that the two senses are separate logically and conceptually (Weinstein, 1993). Martín Vaz Alvarez and Xosé Pereira Fariña (2017) highlighted that new technologies blurred the lines between epistemological and technical expertise, at least on the field of media journalism (Álvarez and Fariña, 2017).

As Robert Evans and Henry Collins (2009) point out, when determining the exact meaning of expertise, one can never disregard its social context. Expertise is never accumulated by one single entity alone, and as such it belongs to the individual and the community as well. It is the community that offers the means to obtain and preserve expertise. The community's responsibility does not end at providing individuals with the means to gain expertise, though, it also judges and approves or disapproves it (Collins and Evans, 2009). According to them, relevant scholarship can be divided into two categories. The realist approach considers expertise to be "the real and substantive possession of groups of experts and that individuals acquire real and substantive expertise through their membership of those groups" (Collins and Evans, 2009, p. 3). In this reading, for the acquisition of expertise the socialization into the traditions of this group of experts is key, and as a consequence, any time spent afar might lead to the partial or total loss of expertise. The relational approach, on the other hand, considers expertise to be a matter of attribution, where the real job is done by the attributors themselves. The group of attributors i.e. other experts awards the label of 'expert' to the presumed expert. To deem someone an 'expert', there is an internal, and an external judgment made. The prior is made by the expert group itself, whereas the latter is taken by people outside this group (Collins and Evans, 2009). Since the target audience of experts in the media, in

general, are laypeople —or people who are not members of the mentioned expert group —, I assume, that in this case, it is the external judgment that matters.

2.1.2 The need for experts

To make consumable the stream of information that citizens come across daily, our minds use frames. Frames work as organizing principles around key ideas, simplifying complex phenomena by emphasizing certain aspects more than others. They enable the recipient of information to quickly distinguish understand why the issue bears importance and what should be done (Vreese, 2005; Nisbet and Mooney, 2007). As Downs (1957) famously put it, average, rational citizens facing a permanent shortage of time are not particularly incentivized to sacrifice their resources for the sake of learning about a plethora of complicated things they come across. What they do rely on, is information and evaluation offered by agents they consider bearing expertise in the area concerned (Downs, 1957). This kind of filtering lowers the amount of information to be looked at and the time needed, and accept as correct (Zaller, 1992).

Nisbet & Mooney (2007) bring our attention to the fact that despite the well-intentioned beliefs one might have, the general public does not behave rationally when seeking to form opinions about complex issues. Instead of weighing and comparing competing claims, and arguments and drawing conclusions at the end of the process, they use their value predispositions and select news outlets and platforms that match their own (Popkin, 1994; Nisbet and Mooney, 2007). Aligning with this, Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985) described the hostile media effect, pinpointing in their study that people are more likely to perceive media coverage as being biased against their side, even when the coverage is actually neutral. This suggests that people are not always open to consider opposing viewpoints and that they may instead seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs (Vallone, Ross and Lepper, 1985).

Framing plays a key role in judging expert credibility, as Lachapelle et al. (2014) found. In their study conducted on the public perception of policy experts, they concluded that expert credibility on the individual level is based on the way the experts framed certain problems. Shall the individual's underlying set of values be congruent with the framing

the given expert uses, the expert is deemed credible (Lachapelle, Montpetit and Gauvin, 2014). Individuals do not only trust experts that frame issues in a way that coincides with their own views, but also tailor their media consumption accordingly. According to the theory of selective exposure, even though people have a plethora of information sources, they tend to consume media outlets that are in line with their already existing beliefs (Klapper, 1960).

Selective exposure is particularly relevant in the case of politics-related issues, where political partisanship strengthens the filtering of information and framing contradicting the individual's set of values (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Stroud, 2008). This means that politically loaded content is even more potent in creating echo chambers, and certain political content would theoretically not even have to be present everywhere, it could already be effective if it found the proper audience that finds it aligning with its own views. Yet, if the political message is conveyed from an authoritarian regime, in a strictly controlled information space via various channels, with no altering information to reach the masses, its effect can become incomparably stronger.

According to Joanna Szostek's study (2018), trust in a media outlet is not even a necessary condition to be receptive to its messages. Even if the audience finds a channel distrustful and propagandistic, it is not immune to the narratives it conveys. In other words, it is not necessary to agree with the framing for being impacted by it. According to her study conducted in 2014, among 'Western-minded' Russian students from a prestigious university shows that the strategic, propagandistic narrative impacted even them. While they described the news on state TV channels as propagandistic and expressed distrust towards them, in different circumstances they themselves reproduced and conveyed the same, propagandistic narratives about Russia's strained relationship with the West. Their exposure to state TV channels came predominantly from their home environment, where they consumed them passively. Mostly, it was switched on by a relative, and they consumed them as a background noise, and they consciously looked for information at various online outlets they deemed more trustworthy, yet their impact was significant (Szostek, 2018).

It must be noted, however, that experts are far from being omnipotent in shaping popular opinion. The popular opinion does not necessarily praise experts and expertise but tends

to doubt them. Distrust of intellectual authority was already documented by Tocqueville (1835), who described it as a key feature anchored in the nature of American democracy (de Tocqueville, 1835). Disdain towards 'intellectuals', and experts; and preference of the citizens' own experience is not limited to democratic societies. Authoritarian systems were no exception to it: for instance, anti-intellectualism in the Russian Empire has a long literature (Kolonickij, 2002; Avrich, 2011).

Some see the fall of expertise and established knowledge in the public eye to be explained by the rise of social media and the changes in media, resulting in a common view according to which every opinion is equal, shall it come from whomever (Nichols, 2017). This thesis, however, focuses on the role of expert figures in the media, as in my views, they still enjoy a distinguished attention and the general audience still attributes importance to what they say, that is why they are still employed. However, the possible differences in the public opinion's approach to established expertise and expert figures in Russia and the West would make a promising research topic for the future.

2.1.3 Markers of an expert

Nichols (2017) subscribes to the relational approach towards determining what expertise is and accentuates its awarded nature: it is the other scientific experts who judge whether the given individual is in possession of deep and comprehensible knowledge in a given field (Nichols, 2017). While he deliberately uses the words 'expert', 'intellectual', and 'professional' interchangeably, the point is clear: listing the marks of expertise based on which the majority of people assesses someone else and decides whether they can rely on their advice in a professional field or subject. These are as follows: formal training or education, credentials, and experience, aptitude or natural talent, acceptance of evaluation, and correction by other experts.

Collins and Evans (2009) substantiate an expert apart in difference from a layperson by three factors. The first is credentials. While credentials might mean certificates of attendance or of achievements, nevertheless there are innumerable skills for which one cannot obtain any certificate. The authors, therefore, find track records of success to be a much better criterion for an expert, excluding pseudo-experts, yet again not including all kinds of expertise. They suggest that experience might be an even better criterion, as it

includes non-formally gained knowledge, such as that of knowledgeable shepherds in the field (Collins and Evans, 2009).

As Lachapelle et al. (2014) found, even though the question of whether an expert can be considered an ‘expert’ is worth exploring, for an average media consumer, expert credibility is much more dependent on the framing that the expert figure uses. If the expert figure frames problems in a way that matches their own underlying set of values, they are likely to believe this figure (Lachapelle, Montpetit and Gauvin, 2014). Hence, in my research, besides creating a typology and categorize these expert figures, I am going to focus more on the *public persona* they represent in the media, and even more on the actual narrative and content these expert figures use, instead of scrutinizing their real background in detail including their finances, which is a task investigative journalists excel at, such as the team of Rain TV exiled from Russia (*Fake News: Wie falsche ‘West-Experten’ die Propaganda stärken* | *Dozhd x Arte Tracks East*, 2022).

2.1.4 Experts in persuasion studies

Scholars of persuasion studies examine the question of communicators’ perceived credibility since decades. Source credibility is an evaluation made by the audience about the believability and persuasiveness of a source. Source cues are the observable features, signals or characteristics associated with the communicator, which impact how the audience perceives the credibility and persuasiveness of the message. The cues make possible for the audience to make judgments about the content without analysing it in depth, reducing the cognitive effort. Source credibility, which is the perceived ability and willingness of a communicator to provide precise and honest information, according to Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) consists of two classic components. One of them is expertise, which reflects the perceived ability or qualifications, and which is observed as a ground for trust in the case of scientists, doctors and policy experts. The other is trustworthiness, based on which the audience decides whether the communicator is honest, fair and unbiased. Trustworthiness reflects the perceived integrity, or intention to tell the truth, and is observed amongst for instance, whistleblowers and neutral observers of crime scenes (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953, pp. 19–25). Later McCroskey and Teven (1999) added a third component: goodwill. It is associated with empathy and good

intentions; hence, the audience assumes that the source cares about the audience's interests (McCroskey and Teven, 1999, p. 91).

Heuristics are an integral part of our thinking and the way people make sense of the world around them; while nowadays it might carry a slightly negative tone suggesting it oversimplifies the world and can be misleading (Groner, Groner and Bischof, 2014). Expertise heuristics is a pertinent phenomenon to the understanding of expert credibility. As Metzger and Flanagin (2008) note, the common, underlying assumption is that experts' statements can be trusted, which means that solely the indication or the perception of someone as an expert of a given field increases their perception of being a credible source. As an example, medical information was found more likely to be believed, when coming from a person with indicated competence in form of a doctor's degree, or a membership of a medical organization (Metzger and Flanagin, 2007, p. 73).

As Meinert and Krämer (2022) found, the presence of expertise cues has a large impact on decision-making and on whether people hold someone an expert. In fact, expertise cues matter more than many other source cues (such as the number of social media likes, shares, pictures, or how interesting a topic is). In their study, they found that the presence of expert cues in information sources heavily impacted the respondents' decision, and even the speed of decision-making. The majority of respondents chose those sources where expertise cues were present, and the presence of these cues made the entire decision-making faster by reducing the cognitive effort. Cues such as a source's professional title, credentials, reputation, or attributes such as pictures and ratings serve as cues indicating expertise (Meinert and Krämer, 2022).

The heuristic-systematic model of Chaiken (1980) describes two thinking styles and divides people into the categories of heuristic processing and systemic processing. The former refers to fast, shortcut thinking, more prone to heuristics such as expert heuristics. Therefore, when these people use heuristic cues, they assume that experts are trustworthy and believe what they say. For the latter category of people, the quality of message matters more, however, credibility is also an important factor (Chaiken, 1980).

The elaboration likelihood model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) suggests that people can process persuasive messages in two ways. Low elaboration is a peripheral route and

implies that the audience is not highly interested or does not want to think too much about the given topic. Such audiences rely on simple signals, hence, for instance, if someone is presented on TV as an expert, they believe them. High elaboration, on the opposite, implies to a motivated and interested audience, which pays attention. Such audiences think about the arguments first, but if they deem the speaker credible, it makes strong arguments even more convincing (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986, pp. 37–39). Both the heuristic-systematic model of Chaiken (1980), and the elaboration likelihood model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) suggest that when people do not want to devote too much time and effort to thinking about a given topic, they trust the messenger or communicator more and find them credible easier. However, for those who would want to put in more cognitive effort, credibility is still important as it helps strong messages and arguments become even more persuasive (Chaiken, 1980; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

To sum up, persuasion studies use the expression “source expertise”, which refers to perceived knowledge, competence or a skill in a subject area of a source or a communicator. According to Hovland, Janis and Kelley, source credibility is composed of expertise and trustworthiness, and these components emerge from observable source cues (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953, pp. 21–23). McCroskey and Teven (1999) adds goodwill to the model and explains source credibility as a multidimensional construct, which is tightly tied to the perceptions triggered by source cues (McCroskey and Teven, 1999, pp. 90–91). Petty and Cacioppo (1986) discuss how source credibility, which is impacted by cues such as expertise, works as a peripheral route to persuasion under low involvement, i.e. on lesser interested audiences willing to cut on cognitive effort (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986, pp. 132–133). Chaiken (1980) notes that source cues, such as expertise influence credibility judgments, especially in cases of heuristic processing (Chaiken, 1980, pp. 753–754). Metzger and Flanagin (2013) demonstrate in their study on digital environments, how source cues such as credentials, affiliations and presentation are interpreted as signals of credibility by the audience (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013, pp. 213–215).

Cultural contexts also matter when examining the importance of source expertise. Pornpitakpan and Francis (2001) took the above-mentioned elaboration model of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) and tested it in two countries with sharply different values in Hofstede’s culture model (1980 and 1991). Hofstede’s model consists of 6 dimensions,

out of which Pornpitakpan and Francis (2001) chose three, according to which their two chosen societies, the Canadian and the Thai, sharply differ. These dimensions are *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism-collectivism*. Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 28). Societies with high power distance index hold the belief that individuals in positions of influence hold the power over what is right and good, and rely on more rigid hierarchical systems (Hofstede, 1991, p. 28). Uncertainty avoidance refers to “the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these” (Hofstede and Bond, 1984, p. 419). The individualism-collectivism index puts a society on a scale where the former is “a situation in which people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only”, whereas the latter is “a situation in which people belong to in-groups or collectivities, which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty” (Hofstede and Bond, 1984, p. 419). The conclusion of Pornpitakpan and Francis (2001) was that societies with high scores in power distance, uncertainty avoidance and low on individualism, such as the Thai attribute greater impact in persuasion to source expertise than societies such as the Canadian, with largely the opposite of these, and where argument strength has more influence (Pornpitakpan and Francis, 2001). According to the Country Comparison Tool, which operationalizes Hofstede’s model, Russia’s scores significantly higher both on the power distance index and the uncertainty avoidance index than Thailand, and somewhat higher but still low on individualism (The Culture Group, 2023). Based on the findings of Pornpitakpan and Francis (2001), as Russia’s scores according to Hofstede’s model in the three examined dimensions exceed the Thai ones, one can assume that in Russian culture source expertise has an even greater impact on persuasion as opposed to argument strengths, which enhances the role of experts.

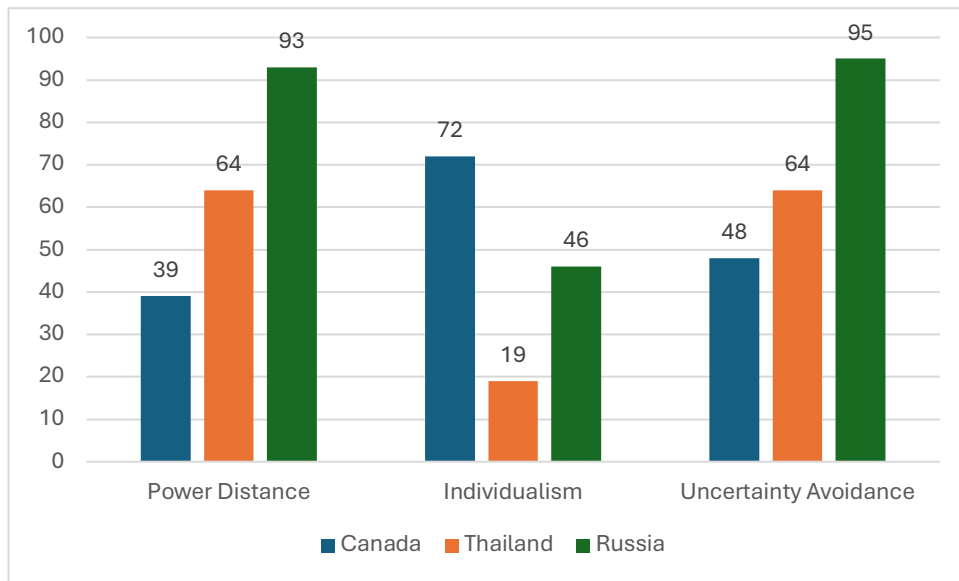


Figure 1. The comparison of Canada, Thailand and Russia according to Hofstede's model. (Data sources: The Culture Group, 2023)

2.1.5 Experts in communication and media studies

Experts' presence on TV and their influence on the opinion of the audience is an extensively researched field of communication and media studies. There are certain key theoretical frameworks explaining it. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) introduced the two-step flow theory, which posited that media effects are mediated by opinion leaders. These people who are often perceived as experts by their audience, first interpret the media content, and then disseminate their interpretations to the broader public. This model highlights the role of interpersonal communication in shaping public opinion, and suggests that audiences are more influenced by trusted individuals than by direct media exposure (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955, pp. 32–33). Opposed to the linear two-step flow theory, the multi-step flow theory posits that information does not flow in one, single direction, but opinion leaders are also influenced by the media and other opinion leaders. This theory, becoming increasingly relevant among scholars studying digital media, is networked; and emphasizes multi-directional communication, and states that the audience also plays an active role in interpreting the information received, spreading and shaping. According to this theory, experts do not shape public opinion in an isolated way, but in the dynamics between experts, media sources and the reactions of the audience (Bakshy *et al.*, 2012, pp. 520–521; Goel, Watts and Goldstein, 2012, p. 624). Experts shape media

narratives, which then influence public opinion, and those in turn shape further discourse, forming a feedback loop (Yin, 1999).

The cultivation theory of Gerbner and Gross (1976) explored how long-time exposure to television shapes the viewers' perceptions of reality. Gerbner argued that television presents consistent messages, leading viewers to adopt a distorted view of the world, which aligns with the televised portrayal. The theory underscores the cumulative effect of media exposure on the audience's beliefs in attitudes (Gerbner and Gross, 1976, pp. 173–199). The halo effect refers to a cognitive bias, where the perception of one positive characteristic impacts the perception of other traits. In the context of experts appearing in media, this means, that if an expert is deemed credible by the audience, the information they present is going to be received more positively by the audience, even if it is not related to the expert's domain, as Babad (2005) has shown. The study demonstrated that the television interviewer's favourable behaviour towards a guest made the viewers to perceive the guest more positively (Babad, 2005, p. 20). According to Auter et al. (2005), viewers also may develop parasocial relationships with media personalities. Over time, the audience may develop a sense of intimacy and trust with television experts, which enhances the experts' persuasive power over the audience. Parasocial relationships can lead audiences to accept information from these figures with minimal scepticism (Auter, Arafa and Al-Jaber, 2005, p. 189).

2.1.6 Experts as elites

Researchers focusing on elites shaping the wider public's political views found that elite influence varies by many factors, including the media environment they operate in, the salience of topics, and competing voices (Santoro *et al.*, 2021). Experts are also considered elite figures, and serve as credible sources of information, whose cues such as credentials known to the public and affiliation signal legitimacy (Yin, 1999; Santoro *et al.*, 2021). Studies on television news demonstrate that expert base-rate cues and direct commentary yield high impact on public perception (Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, 1987; Lefevere, De Swert and Walgrave, 2012). On the other hand, research examining written formats revealed that portraying opposing expert statements as equally valid (creating a "false balance") reduces perceived consensus (Koehler, 2016). Across media formats, clear source attribution and coherent framing enhance expert credibility and the

receptiveness of the audience to their views (Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Druckman, 2001). Research in print media links non-partisan expert attribution to increased bipartisanship and improved agenda-setting (Seltzer and Mitrook, 2009; Robison and Mullinix, 2016). In contrast, presentations marred by visual distractions or aggressive, non-substantive cues undermine their influence (Guzik and Stolińska, 2021). Moreover, studies addressing health, anti-vaccination and climate debates found that expert messages operate alongside personal factors such as ideology and education, and the latter factors could undermine or improve the perceived credibility of the expert's message (Brulle, Carmichael and Jenkins, 2012; Holland *et al.*, 2012; Bongiorno, 2021).

Scholars of knowledge sociology such as Hartmann (2006) describe the intertwined nature of elites and knowledge, and how experts co-create a political-economic coalition with the state (Hartmann, 2006). This notion is pertinent, as in authoritarian countries such as Russia, expert status is not necessarily an independent attribute or earned honour and is based on political loyalty (not on academic competencies or merits). As the portal Meduza (2024) reported, for instance, the outlets of the Kremlin's media empire were "requested" by the Putin administration that editors at their publications turn for opinions coming from pro-government experts through an autonomous non-governmental organization (in Russian ANO) called Integratsiya (Интеграция), which provides the expert opinions for pro-Kremlin media outlets. Each media outlet is assigned a unique Integratsiya-staffer to whom they can send article topics and inquiries. In return, they receive a written statement from one of the "public opinion leaders" with whom Integratsiya collaborates (Meduza, 2024a).

2.1.7 The role of experts appearing in the media

According to Mariusz Makowski (2015), experts in mass communication are put in a particular role, which is the bridge between the world of insiders and reality of laypeople. Their main task is to provide journalists with "raw material" which they can then tailor-make for the given medium. This sometimes results in a different outcome for the expert from the original intent (Makowski, 2015). Jürgen W. Falter (2008) warns experts in the media to stay neutral and stick to topics they truly bear expertise in to preserve their credibility. He finds that the appearance of experts in the media cannot be described as traditional political consultation. Yet, it can be conducted via the media (Falter, 2008).

Lars Kjerulf Petersen highlights that experts play a multifaceted role in the media, as they can serve both as sources of information and participants in societal rituals. In his study about experts in media reports about the environment, he pinpoints that the use of experts is not limited to its information function, but also play a ritual function in societal communication, performing collective sentiments and shared worldviews based on both consensus and contention (Petersen, 2008).

Experts' full potential, however, can be severely limited by a slanted media environment, political constraints, and skewed incentives, as Pascal Abb pinpoints (2021). In his paper about the role of Chinese foreign policy experts in the domestic media, he concludes that these external factors limit the usefulness of these experts for improving policy outcomes and managing public perceptions of China's rise (Abb, 2021).

In authoritarian countries, in centralized and controlled media environments, the experts' presence plays a vital role not only in shaping the public opinion but also in legitimizing the regime and its policies. Julia Glathe concludes that in Russia, the experts appearing in state media are controlled by the state, preventing substantial criticism and forcing loyalty. This tight control limits their capacity to provide impartial advice (Glathe, 2020). There are opposing opinions too, for instance, Ryabov and Khanova (2023) examined what is the role of expert commentaries in Russian news agencies TASS and RIA Novosti in implementing the state information policy. They found that the examined expert opinions did not violate the "principle of neutrality and equidistance" (Ryabov & Khanova, 2023). However, when assessing the latest work, the limited academic freedom in Russia should be taken into consideration too, especially, since the research topic of state propaganda is a supposedly sensitive one.

Literature on the use of foreign experts in authoritarian media environments seems to serve even more to provide extra legitimacy to government policies. The study of Kecheng Fang (2022) on foreign experts appearing in Chinese domestic propaganda deserves particular attention, as the information environment of China is in many aspects similarly under state control as the Russian one. Fang systematically explores how the Chinese Communist Party uses foreign experts in its domestic propaganda to provide an additional layer of legitimacy to Chinese government policies. The practice is not new,

as Fang traces back the roots of it to the early revolutionary years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), when foreigners have not only played an important role in disseminating the positive picture of the CCP abroad, but their favourable opinions were used for internal propaganda as well (Fang, 2022).

The working method here for the regime is to form the narratives domestically, and externalising its validation and underpinning, by having it repeated by seemingly foreign experts, who hold a level of credibility in the eye of the audience. The externality might be simulated, and even objective and impartial expert opinions can be reframed, translated, selected and edited by the centralized media environment of the authoritarian country. There are several documented examples for that from Russia, as collected by EUvsDisinfo (2019). For instance, British politician Tim Wilson or university professor John Curtice gave an interview to NTV, owned by the state-owned company Gazprom, and the subtitles to their words had nothing in common with what they originally said. The practice to misrepresent what the speakers of a foreign language expressed and distort the subtitles to make the coverage align with the Kremlin's narratives does apply solely to experts, but to random, voiced everyday men of the street alike (EUvsDisinfo, 2019). Authoritarian countries do not only utilize the externalized validation of foreign experts, but of other actors too. Lately, China, for instance extensively utilizes foreign influencers to praise the country and directly or indirectly its leadership and give an external validation in the eyes of domestic audiences (Liang and McNamee, 2026).

The use of foreign specialists' opinion for domestic propaganda purposes was also observed in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union's domestic propaganda against its population used foreign experts and their opinions in a variety of methods. Abramov (2020) along with Reinberg and Heckscher (2023) emphasize the impact of Western tactics and the effectiveness of Soviet propaganda in changing citizens' worldviews. This was accomplished through the Soviet influence system's selective permeability to international public relations and Western commercial advertising tactics (Abramov, 2020), as well as the utilization of foreign experts' viewpoints to build a set of beliefs imposed by propaganda (Reinberg and Heckscher, 2022).

2.2 Specificities of the Russian media space

2.2.1 An authoritarian system, restricted information space

The nuances of describing the system of the Russian Federation show certain variations among social scientists, however, there is consensus about the fact that it is an authoritarian regime (Gel'man, 2015; Busygina, Filippov and Taukebaeva, 2018; Smyth, 2020). The term 'informational autocracy' by Guriev and Treisman is one I deem one of the best to describe the essence of Russia's contemporary regime as it pays distinguished attention to the role of information. The authors point out that authoritarian leaderships decreasingly rely on using crude force in exerting control and repression in their countries, as it would undermine the image of able governance they seek to transfer. They do master the manipulation of information instead. A key element of this theory is the gap in political knowledge that exists between the informed elite group and the general public. The authors note that informational autocracies may revert to overt dictatorships such as in the case of Turkey (Guriev and Treisman, 2020). In 2022, with the invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent changes in the everyday life of Russian citizens, we witnessed a dramatic authoritarian shift (Freedom House, 2022a).

Lacking media pluralism is part of those criteria based on which a country is identified as a non-democratic system or a democracy (Freedom House, 2022b). To what extent did Russian media freedom ever exist is debated among Western social scientists, but it was already described as neo-authoritarian (Becker, 2004), and lacking media freedom (Arutunyan, 2009) in the 2000s. The trend of decreasing media liberty in Russia, however, enjoys an academic consensus (Marsh and Froese, 2004; Lipman, 2005a; Schönfeld, 2012; Bacon, Renz and Cooper, 2016; Skillen, 2016). Indirectly or directly, the Russian state exercises control over all major national television channels, national radio networks, national newspapers, and news agencies, along with more than 60% of the country's local newspapers (Freedom House, 2022a).

Russian internet is not free either, according to Freedom House (Freedom House, 2022b). The government demonstrated strong political will for ensuring centralized and controlled internet traffic. According to the original plans, the state intended to create a strongly regulated and securitized information space, called RuNet (Nocetti, 2015). Contrary to the ambitions start, there were certain pitfalls in the control-by-infrastructure

governmental endeavours (Stadnik, 2021), although the project went a long way (Asmolov and Kolozaridi, 2017, 2020). A tightening censorship applies to online and offline outlets alike, and freedom of expression is radically curbed, and the digital surveillance of citizens develops quickly (Borodikhin, 2026).

This, in addition to the vague speech laws accepted since 2022, criminalizing any “discrimination of the Russian army”, spreading “fake news about the war” or even calling the invasion a “war” resulted in hundreds of prosecutions, and a growing number of political prisoners, who are more plentiful than ever since the Stalin era (Dubah, 2024; Mazonaite, 2026). Such laws are applied even retrospectively, as the case of opposition politician Lev Shlosberg shows (‘Russian Prosecutors Request 12 Years in Prison for Lev Shlosberg, Head of Liberal Yabloko Party’, 2026). Many foreign social media platforms and thousands of websites are banned or blocked along with numerous messaging applications, and in the fourth and fifth years of the full-scale invasion even mobile internet itself is regularly shut down by the authorities for security reasons (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

Russian journalists in exile labelled “foreign agents” are persecuted abroad as well (*Russia: New Law Expands the Kremlin’s Legal Persecution of Exiled Journalists*, 2026). The Kremlin seeks to silence simple citizens’ anti-war or anti-regime opinions as well, inflicting a “civic death”, effectively freezing the citizenship of those deemed to be traitors of the Motherland (*New Russian Law Inflicts “Civic Death” on Government Critics Abroad as “Traitors to the Motherland”*, 2026).

The most widely used search engine, Yandex filters and hides search finds if the information is sensitive to the Kremlin, as it happened for example in conjunction with the relations of the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin. Yandex reportedly filtered the finds for the most relevant keywords related to him (Rofe, 2022). Similarly, the main online Russian news aggregate Yandex News was not showcasing any articles about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the first period of it as the site's former editor-in-chief presented it on Facebook in March 2022 (Gershenzon, 2022). In contrast, the invasion flooded the media and especially online worldwide, continuously being in the headlines. The LLM model of Yandex, YandexGPT is also an instrument of propaganda, not only it remains silent on topics uncomfortable to the Kremlin, even though algorithmically it

would “know” the truth, as the results for such questions are withheld due to strict post-generation filters (*Censored AI: YandexGPT as an Instrument of Russian Propaganda*, 2026).

2.2.2 Russian popular opinion and the media

In order to assess the impact of political talk shows aired prime time, it is important to understand the Russian domestic audiences’ media consumption, and what is known about their trust in what they view. Looking at the media consumption habits of Russian people, one can see that while along with worldwide tendencies, they watch gradually less and less of it, television is a consumed and trusted source of information, especially among the older demographic groups and rural areas. It is still a powerful media institution, while the concrete estimates show certain differences. Before the full-scale war, according to Vartanova (2021) over 70% of Russians regularly watched federal TV channels for news (Vartanova, 2021). Levada Center’s 2021 research estimated that within 5 years, the rate of those watching news on TV regularly diminished from 90 percent to 62 percent. Also, the rate of those people who watch the news on TV every single day, shrank from 44 percent to 34 percent. While online portals’ popularity steadily grew among the respondents for gaining information about the world, and the popularity of TV, such as worldwide, has shown a slow decrease, television remained a crucial point of reference. (Levada Center, 2021). Among TV channels most frequently watched, traditionally, Channel One (Первый канал) stood on the first place (watched by 72% of respondents), followed by Russia 1 (Россия-1, abroad as RTR-Planeta, watched by 46%), and NTV (HTB, watched by 40%) (Levada Center, 2017). As of Levada Center (2019), however, watching state-run TV channels’ news was not equal to believing them too, as the overall trust in TV has shrunk from 79% to 54% within the period of 2009 to 2019. Trust in the most watched channels was not particularly high either: Channel One (Первый канал) was trusted by 47%, Russia 1 (Россия-1) by 48%, and NTV (HTB) by 36% of the respondents (RBC, 2019).

Russia’s invasion against Ukraine brought about significant changes in Russians’ news consumptions. The trend of decline in watching TV for news has turned, and as Levada Center’s later results from 2024 show; 65% of Russians identified television as their primary news source (Levada Center, 2024). Not only did the influence of television

grow, but also the Russian audiences' interest in news. The Columbia Business School (2023) observed that ten out of the twenty most popular TV-programmes in Russia were related to news, which indicates that public interest in news content over entertainment has grown palpably (Columbia Business School, 2023). The reliance on TV as the main information source, however, does not equal trust in it. The mentioned, 2022 increase in attention directed at TV as a news source, did not go hand-in-hand with an increase in trust in it. According to Kommersant (2022), trust in TV news has shown a sharp decrease from 33% to 23% within a month after the invasion started (*Kommersant*, 2022).

According to the Levada Center (2024), this decrease in trust has started to gradually recover, especially in the subgroups of elderly people (marking 66% among people aged 55 and above), respondents with secondary education and below (55%), and those who 'barely have enough money for food' (59%). Older and younger generations' news consumption habits sharply differ. In the Levada Center's 2024 study, while overall the population's 65% indicated TV as the source they get local and global news from, in the age group of 18-24 years it was 42%, while above 55 years 85% (Levada Center, 2024). In the same study, the respondents were also asked about journalists, TV hosts and bloggers covering politics and social politics they follow and seek to watch regularly. All the first 5 places of this list were taken by political talk show hosts, except for Margarita Simonyan, who is not a host herself but a regular guest and contributor to several of them and is the head of RT and Rossiya Segodnya. The list is as follows: 1) Vladimir Solovyov (*Вечер с Владимиром Соловьёвым* - *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov*), 2) Olga Skabeyeva (*60 Минут* - *60 Minutes*), 3) Yevgeny Popov (*60 Минут* - *60 Minutes*) 4) Margarita Simonyan (Editor-in-Chief of RT and Rossiya Segodnya, *Соловьёв LIVE* contributor and frequent guest to talk shows), 5) Dmitry Kiselev (*Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселёвым* - *News of the Week with Dmitry Kiselev*) (Levada Center, 2024).

As of 2025, the average daily audience of television was 62% of the population, and they spent approximately 3 hours and 20 minutes in front of it each day, the age group 35-44 accounts for 2.5 hours, while the one of 55-56 spent over 5 hours in front of the screen (Mediabaza, 2025). Over a part of the viewers, however, a certain apathy seems to prevail, with regard to state propaganda, as in the first four months of 2026, the ratings of the three most watched state-run channels, Rossiya-1, Channel One and NTV suffered an average fall in ratings of 14% (Jones, 2026).

2.2.3 Propaganda and state-controlled disinformation in Russia

While the information space is increasingly controlled and limited by the Kremlin, one can see a robust governmental propaganda machine in action (Meister 2016). Its disinformation activities target foreign audiences as well (Van Herpen, 2015; Polyakova *et al.*, 2016), but I examine now exclusively its domestic ones. Although digitalization, freer access to information and mass media pose a challenge to autocracies in general, shall there be political will, these regimes can hugely benefit from them in pro-actively shaping the public discourse and media narrative (Oates, 2016). Russia's case is an eloquent example of the latter one (Sanovich, 2017).

It has rich literature on how government control increased in the media both style- and content-wise (Hutchings and Rulyova, 2009). State media works under strong censorship based on interviews with former employees of these channels (Loshak, 2015; Sidorov, 2015). From the works of Peter Pomerantsev (Pomerantsev, 2015; Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014) we know that the public broadcasters' programs are carefully orchestrated and controlled such as which narratives to be used on the given week of an issue, which talking heads to feature. Even when given a certain level of editorial autonomy, self-censorship prevailed (SchimpfossI and Yablokov, 2014; Adamova, 2017). Also, environments dominated by propaganda are inherently vulnerable to information manipulation (Shirikov, 2022). Controlling the media played a crucial role in helping the Kremlin entrench political control (Lipman, 2009; Dougherty, 2015).

2.2.4 Foreign expert figures in the Russian media

Political talk shows enjoy great popularity in Russia, with the power to disseminate ideologies, frames, narratives, and a certain language (Cottiero *et al.*, 2015; Grishin and Mitrofanova, 2015). As Tolz and Teper (2018) describe, from 2011 ideological messaging flooded the state media, permanently campaigning for or against something. With recurring narratives being repeated in various genres of programs, the messages are effectively conveyed. At about the same time, a new type of content appeared: political talk shows. These talk shows played an essential role in the media campaigns which run, providing day-to-day framing of actual political events, entertaining the public often via vulgarity and brawls. These political talk shows belong to the genre of “agitainment”, and

prove to be impactful in conveying ideological messages; also, they address issues that the public finds worrisome in an engaging and entertaining way (Tolz and Teper, 2018). The programs focus on inciting strong emotions and moral outrage, anger and apply “other uncivil techniques” to support the Kremlin’s propaganda messages (Sharafutdinova, 2021). For these programmes the key question is whether the messages can be made credible and persuasive to the audiences, not whether their content is true or false. As another distinctive feature, their credibility does not have to be everlasting. It is enough that they are not apparently counter-factual and immediately deniable.

Agitainment programs often feature foreign talking heads. As Knobel (2020) describes the example of such a show, *The Great Game (Bol’shaya Igra)*, which is a talk show about global politics, supposedly presenting American and Russian perspectives featuring a host from each nation. As she writes, this program reinforces the impression that Russia is still an equal partner to the US, and that the former being a great power still has a say in world politics, hence, the US seeks good relations with it. These talking heads, however, by no means represent the US, their function is to appeal to Russian greatpowerness, and reinforce the Kremlin’s geopolitical imagery. As she notes, the American host was not only born in Moscow, but had close ties with Trump, which aligns well with the Kremlin’s goals for the program (Knobel, 2020).

Foreign talking heads positioned as experts often play different roles. Their role can be to represent a country in the eye of the audience, being shouted at or even physically abused by the other experts and the host. For example, the American journalist Michael Bohm living in Russia for decades was routinely invited to such shows, seemingly to represent the US stance on issues only to be humiliated, ridiculed, and yelled at by others in the studio (Rain TV, 2018). The exiled Russian Rain TV gathered a handful of such media personae, who serve this purpose. They are branded as an expert or journalist from a given country — in which they are largely unknown — to represent it in the eyes of the Russian domestic audience, used as an instrument to underpin the narrative the program uses (*Fake News: Wie falsche ‘West-Experten’ die Propaganda stärken | Dozhd x Arte Tracks East*, 2022).

2.3 The strategic narrative

2.3.1 The chosen concept

To conceptualize the leading narrative and framing of conveyed messages by the Russian propaganda empire, I bring in the concept of strategic narrative that was introduced by Robin Stryker (1996) but elaborated in the most detailed way by Alistair Miskimmon et al. (2014). According to them, this theory builds on the concept of soft power (Nye Jr, 1990) but puts it in a contemporary environment. Whereas Nye's work was concentrating on the capabilities of exerting soft power, and later also admits the role of narratives in international relations (Nye Jr, 2008, 2011), though he paid little attention to the methods of persuading masses and the exertion of influence itself. The concept of strategic narrative seeks to fulfil this gap and focuses on exploring the conditions of communication and interaction under which a narrative becomes persuasive to the audiences it targets (Stryker, 1996; Miskimmon, Roselle and O'Loughlin, 2014). This concept has recently been widely used in the research of Russian propaganda domestically and abroad (Irvin-Erickson, 2017; Levinger and Roselle, 2017; Szostek, 2017c, 2017a; Fridrichová, 2023; Li & Li, 2025).

2.3.2 Narratives

Narratives are a crucial part of any communication process. They are "hardwired into humans" (Salmon, 2010). The idea of narrative in the human sciences is widely used and thoroughly documented (Bevir, 2006; Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Kreiswirth, 2000; Ricoeur, 1985; Suganami, 2008). Narrative is a subclass of discourse (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Once narratives are established, certain identities and courses of action appear to be right, natural, acceptable, and "normal", while others seem to be the reverse (Bruner, 1991). If a critical mass as social actors regard a narrative as "common sense", then it becomes a dominant narrative (Krebs, 2015). Additionally, to become dominant, narratives mobilize and refer to more widely accepted, institutionalized "master narratives" (Ewick & Silbey, 1995). The *narrative power of countries*, i.e. their capacity of narratives to produce effects is increasingly studied (Gustafsson et al., 2019; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019). It consists of a subclass of 'discursive' or 'productive power' (Digeser, 1992).

2.3.3 The history of strategic narrative

Strategic narrative as a concept was first used by Robin Stryker (1996), who found this to be a “useful frame for constructing the history-theory relationship in qualitative, historical research”. He used this framework for “organizing a continuous and productive interplay of history and theory” (Stryker, 1996 p. 305). Lawrence Freedman (2006) introduced the term strategic narrative to international politics to describe compelling storylines that persuasively explain events. Strategic in this expression does not hint at the importance of any given narrative, instead, means that it is the result of the deliberate actions of political actors. They use narratives to reach political goals and appeal to sentiments using various imageries and historical parallels (Freedman, 2006).

The framework of the strategic narrative was first predominantly applied to assess war and conflicts. In the beginning, this concept was used to study the importance of persuasion in contemporary conflicts (De Franco, 2012; Simpson, 2012), and how contemporary military campaigns are portrayed to audiences domestically and abroad (De Graaf et al., 2015) and how a political community discusses strategic problems (Krebs, 2015). Strategic narratives can strengthen or disrupt alliances appealing to raising fears of abandonment or entrapment intending to change the behaviour of actors (Roselle, 2017), and frame national policy decisions (O’Shea, 2019; Porter & Mykleby, 2011). States might even create joint strategic narratives, such as the BRICS did in attempt to construct a collective identity amongst different power capabilities and interests (Noort, 2017).

Strategic narrative has become a popular framework to study Russian mass media communication from 2014 and on (Hinck et al., 2018). For instance, Joanna Szostek studied Russian state identity (2017a) the power and limits of Russian strategic narratives in Ukraine (2017b), and also news media repertoires and strategic narrative reception in Russia, in 2018 (Szostek, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). Using this framework, it was explored how the country narrates global order and disorder (Levinger & Roselle, 2017; Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2017), how it strengthens and disrupts alliances (Roselle, 2017), and uses its genocide discourses in Ukraine (Irvin-Erickson, 2017).

2.3.4 The concept of strategic narrative

Strategic narrative concept builds on that of soft power (Nye Jr, 1990) but puts it in a contemporary environment. Nye's work was elaborate regarding the means and resources and how the US can continue to influence the world after the fall of the USSR. He finds the role of narratives important in international relations (Nye Jr, 2008, 2011) and suggests that international affairs are a matter of stories clashing, of “whose story wins” (Nye Jr, 2013). He pays little attention though to the methods of persuading the masses and the exertion of influence itself and focuses on soft power assets or capabilities.

Strategic narrative is a concept used to exactly bridge this gap and focuses on exploring the conditions of communication and interaction under which a narrative becomes persuasive to the audiences it targets (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Steele, 2012). To date, it is the study of Miskimmon et al. (2014) that offers the most thorough theoretical framework to comprehend strategic narratives. They argue that whereas it is commonly accepted that soft power is a key to understanding International Relations, strategic narrative helps to comprehend and examine this soft power. Based on Kenneth Burke's discussion of narratives (1969) they dismantle strategic narratives into 4 components.

- (1) Characters or actors, that have agency and are depicted as important from the perspective of the narrative. They are portrayed as full of assertions, assumptions, bearing underlying principles, and rationales.
- (2) Setting/environment/space, that describes the stage how the international system is built and how it works. Assertions, assumptions, underlying intentions, and rationales are also generously attributed, which partially determine the possibilities regarding issues to be resolved and aims to achieve.
- (3) Conflict or action, that explains which actor does what, and what consequences follow the act. Narratives often connect past, present, and future as well, hence the temporality aspect is likely to be presented.
- (4) Resolution or suggested resolution. Humans are receptive to narratives partially due to their presentation of action to settle a conflict or interfere with the status quo. Narratives limit the plethora of possibilities of both thought and action, unilateral use of force for example becomes more difficult for an actor, in the case of a narrative highlighting the importance of peaceful conflict resolution and international cooperation (Burke, 1969).

As Miskimmon et al. (2014) put it, narratives bearing the structure above are able to shape perceived interests and set constraints to imaginable and possible scenarios and solutions (Miskimmon et al., 2014). A year earlier, the same Miskimmon et al. (2013) found that strategic narratives operate on 3 different levels that are inseparably linked. The first, International System Narratives describe the world's structure, its actors, and the way how it works the way it does. An example of it would be the Cold War or The Rise of Eurasia. The second, National Narratives encompass narratives about the nation and the goals and values it holds. For instance, the US historically being committed to freedom and democracy, Russia is a protector of traditional values, etc. (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1987). The third, Issue Narratives explains why policymaking is imminent and necessary, and how it will be successfully accomplished. This response to the perceived necessity sets governmental actions in context and frames them, as policies have to be explained to elites and the wider public domestically and internationally and sell them as well (George, 2019). Miskimmon et al. conclude by arguing that although not all narratives are used strategically on the international scene, a change at any of the mentioned three levels may affect the other levels as well (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

2.3.5 Effectiveness of strategic narratives

Regarding their effectiveness, Olivier Schmitt (2018) conducted the most thorough research to this day. He assessed how political communities targeted with certain strategic narratives receive them. In his work, he brings in political myths as a unit that strategic narratives can build on. Narratives do not appear in a cultural vacuum but always anchor in an already existing imagery that different scholars grasp slightly differently. For example, the US national security narratives are embedded within “enduring identity narratives” such as American exceptionalism at Krebs (2015). Schmitt uses the term political myth. Political myths in Schmitt's understanding are present in a political community as a “semi-permanent feature”, subject to evolution and change, and “their content is sedimented over time”. As their distinctive feature is that it is impossible to pinpoint the actor crafting them. Strategic narratives, on the other hand, are crafted by political actors with the deliberate intention of influencing the target audience. Hence, the strategic narrative is a way for political myths to be operationalized and actualized. In assessing the reception of strategic narratives by a political community, he focuses on the dispersion of a political myth, and its coherence with other, local myths. As an example

of the two, the myth of the clash of civilizations is widely known all around the world (Bottici, 2007); whereas nationalist myths are per definitionem local myths. Shall a strategic narrative be coherent with local political myths, — thus, not clash with and contradict already existing myths in a community —, the chance for its receptivity increases significantly. Coherence is not to be confused with popularity but should be understood in terms of content. He finds that for successful reception, an external strategic narrative must be able to resonate with local political myths (Schmitt, 2018).

A pertinent case study by Joanna Szostek (2018) demonstrates that acceptance of the strategic story does not even require faith in a media outlet. Even if viewers distrust a station and feel it to be propagandistic, they are nonetheless susceptible to the narratives it presents. Her 2014 study of "Western-minded" students from a Russian top university reveals that the strategic, propagandistic narrative had an effect on them as well. They repeated the narrative of Russia's tense ties with the West while describing the news on state TV networks as propagandistic and expressing mistrust for them. Their primary source of exposure to state TV networks was their home environment, and they sought out information at various internet sources they believed to be more reliable (Szostek, 2018).

2.4 Russia and the West

2.4.1 The West for Russia through history

Before looking at contemporary anti-Western narratives in Russian domestic propaganda, it is important to decipher what "the West" is in the Russian public discourse. What does this notion entail, which countries constitute it, and how did its symbolic meaning change with time? How did the relationship of Russia and its predecessors change with it, and how did Russian elites' and everyday people's views relate to these changes? "The West" is a complex, layered and deeply historical notion in Russian political culture and propaganda. It does not only encompass a geopolitical construct, but also an ideological and civilizational "other" against which Russia defines and positions itself, and vice versa (Neumann, 1998). Both the meaning and the constituents of the West have shifted over time, reflecting Russia's changing self-perception, geopolitical realities and internal political agendas.

Starting from the earliest modern period, Russia's relationship with the West has been highly ambivalent and dialectical. Peter the Great's westernizing reforms in the early 18th century aimed to modernize Russia along European lines, looking at and portraying Western Europe (especially countries such as the Netherlands, England or Germany) as a clear model of progress, and desirable to follow (Anisimov and Alexander, 2015, p. 45). However, this process — that is also characterized by non-Western approach —, did not erase a concurrent narrative of cultural and spiritual distinctiveness and uniqueness, a civilization which referred to Russia as the third Rome. The two ideological currents did not follow each other linearly but coexisted and interacted throughout several centuries of Russian history. One of its pillars, the Third Rome ideology originates in the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Russian Orthodox monks and clerics, particularly Philotheus of Pskov promoted the idea that Moscow was the rightful and only successor to Rome and the Byzantium, and warned that two Romes have already fallen, whereas the third stands, and there will be no fourth (De Simone, 2018). This doctrine, which has become central to Tsarist legitimacy and Russian exceptionalism elevated Russia to be the last bastion of Christianity, in contrast with the heretical and morally corrupt West (Cracraft, 1971, p. 112).

The mentioned rule of Peter the Great from 1682 to 1725, and especially his Great Embassy (a Russian diplomatic mission lead by him personally from 1697 to 1698) marked a turning point in Russia's engagement with Western Europe. While the Great Embassy failed to reach its main goal as of strengthening and expanding the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire, it collected valuable information about the international situation. As a fruit of these international experiences, Peter the Great introduced robust reforms with regard to all aspects of the state's life. The military, administration, fashion, education and the church have all undergone these reforms, which were inspired by the Netherlands, England and Germany (Anisimov and Alexander, 2015, p. 46). His proclaimed goal was to modernize and Europeanise Russia, and to build a powerful absolutist state which can compete militarily with the European powers.

While Peter the Great adopted Western technologies and models, he never embraced Western values to the fullest, such as secularism or liberalism. Also, while the reforms were forcefully implemented, the "Third Rome worldview" and the belief in Russian exceptionalism did not disappear, but continued "underground", in parallel, particularly

among ecclesiastical and intellectual circles. Many contemporaries viewed these reforms as a betrayal of traditional Orthodox and Slavic values, laying the ground for the later Westernizer-Slavophile debate of the 19th century. As Erzsébet Köves (1982) describes it, the differences between the Tsarist Empire and Western European states continued to grow, and the word *isklyuchitelnost'* was coined to mark Russia's exceptionality and uniqueness, which concept was accepted by all 19th century Russian intellectual movements. The consequences drawn from this uniqueness, however, were rather different. Two groups emerged, namely the Westernizers (*zapadniki*) and Slavophiles (*slavyanofily*), representing two schools of thought, offering various remedies for Russia's problems. The former sought Western achievements as examples to follow, the latter desired a return to the patriarchal order and morals of the Russia of pre-Peter the Great (Köves, 1982, pp. 7–8).

The debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles has further shaped the conceptualization of “the West”. Slavophiles viewed Western Europe as morally and spiritually decadent and juxtaposed it to the “authentic” Orthodox and communal Russian identity (Hosking, 2001, pp. 57–60). Key philosophers and writers of this current were Aleksey Khomyakov, Ivan Kireevsky, Konstantin Aksakov. As of Khomyakov, the West was “spiritually bankrupt” due to rationalism, individualism and materialism (Racu, 2016), and emphasised Orthodoxy, communal values (*sobornost'*), integral knowledge (*tselnost'*) and the peasant commune (*mir*) as spiritually superior alternatives to Western liberalism. Kireevsky and Khomyakov argued that the West was obsessed with external law and conflict, whereas Russian culture valued organic unity, faith, and moral consensus (Walicki, 1968, p. 153).

Meanwhile, Westernizers (such as Pyotr Chaadayev, Vissarion Belinsky, Alexander Herzen, and later Ivan Turgenev) advocated for closer alignment with Western liberal political institutions and cultural norms. According to their views, Russia was historically backward and in a desperate need for adopting Western political institutions, science, rationalism, and liberalism to modernise. For instance, Chaadayev's *Philosophical Letters* (1836) sparked controversy by calling Russia a country “outside of history,” isolated from the progressive march of European civilisation (Chaadaev, 1969, p. 45). Belinsky saw the autocracy and Orthodoxy as oppressive and hailed European rationalism and individual rights (Robinson, 2023, p. 256). Herzen, a more radical voice, advocated

for a socialist transformation rooted in peasant communes, but remained committed to the values of the Western Enlightenment (Schapiro, 1960, p. 463).

Russian fears of Western infiltration and weakening attempts were not always unfounded. The policy of incitement, or *Aufwiegelungspolitik*, was a strategy implied by the Central Powers during World War I, which aimed at the destabilization of the Russian Empire from within, supporting nationalist movements (Kennan, 1956). The key goal of this policy was to weaken Russia's strength on the Eastern Front, and among its tools were the support for the Bolsheviks. The memory of this policy in the Soviet Union was contradictory. While the official ideology remained silent about the Bolsheviks' former support from the West, their opposition, such as the émigré "whites" portrayed them as foreign agents. The memory policy of the policy of incitement in the Soviet Union was built around taboo and denial as it would have undermined the system's self-image and national legitimacy (Kolonitskii, 2020).

The Great Patriotic War is an event which occupies a unique place in contemporary Russia's historic consciousness and is extensively used in the Kremlin's memory politics today, shaping Russian's perception of the West. The Soviet Union fought alongside the United States and the United Kingdom against Nazi Germany, yet, post-war Soviet memory gradually reframed the conflict as an almost exclusively Soviet victory achieved through unparalleled sacrifice and heroism, increasingly downplaying the Western Allies' contribution (Tuminez, 2000, pp. 78). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially under Vladimir Putin, the Great Patriotic War was turned into the central pillar of Russian national identity and state legitimacy (Edele, 2017, pp. 191-194). The historical event was transformed into an interpretative framework through which contemporary Russia evaluates its Western relations. Western criticism or perceived enmity is interpreted as attacks on Russia's moral authority derived from its victory over Nazism. The War also functions as a political myth that reinforces the image of Russia as Europe's historical liberator, and showcases the West as an ungrateful, revisionist, inherently hostile entity. There is also a selectiveness in remembrance, as while vicious remarks at the expense of Germany, the main enemy are common, these lack on Italy or Japan, as these are not fitting the Soviet centric concept of the Great Patriotic War.

During the Soviet era, the West became the symbol of capitalism, imperialism and ideological adversaries, particularly the United States and the countries constituting NATO. The Cold War has intensified this binary opposition with Western countries representing political, military and ideological threats to the Soviet Union and to the socialist project as a whole (Tuminez, 2000, p. 83; Hosking, 2001, pp. 212–214). From the late 1940s onwards, the Soviet propaganda persistently portrayed the Western states as bare instruments of bourgeois exploitation and neo-colonial dominance, driven predominantly by the interests of capital and bent on the containment and destruction of socialism (Hosking, 2001, p. 213). This dichotomy between the “peace-loving” socialist Eastern camp and the “aggressive” capitalist West was institutionalised through education, media, and diplomatic rhetoric alike.

The Cold War, which was framed by both sides in stark ideological terms, intensified further this mutual “otherness”. The Soviet elites routinely characterized the West as a source of subversion, which attempted to infiltrate the USSR through “ideological sabotage, bourgeois values, and anti-communist agitation” (Tuminez, 2000, p. 83). In this context, the notion of “the West” did not refer to a neutral geographical space, but to a constellation of political, moral, and economic threats, most visibly embodied by the United States, West Germany, and the United Kingdom. The Brezhnev era’s cultural production has further crystallized this narrative. Movies, literature, speeches of the party leaders emphasized Western decadence, consumerism and racial inequality and contrasted them to the supposed Soviet social justice and moral clarity (Yurchak, 2013, pp. 95–97). Anti-Westernism has become a structural component of Soviet identity, often used to explain domestic hardships as the consequences of foreign encirclement and ideological warfare. By the 1980s, while public fascination steadily grew with Western consumer culture across the USSR - especially among youngsters - the state continued to depict “the West” as a morally corrupt, hegemonic force which stands in a sharp contrast with socialist values (Zubok, 2009, pp. 204–207). The era of Mikhail Gorbachev marked a short-lived re-conceptualization of the West, as he tried to revitalize the Soviet system by adopting certain aspects of Western economic and political models, particularly those associated with liberal democracy, market economy and the rule of law (Brown, 1997, pp. 230–233). However, the ideological binary endured even the period of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Gorbachev himself promoted a vision of a “common European home” and

suggested that ideological confrontation with the West could be transcended (Gorbachev, 1987, p. 28).

The economic and political collapse that followed the USSR's dissolution, has profoundly discredited the romanticized view of the West in the eyes of wide layers of the Russian society. The rapid liberalization policies pursued under Boris Yeltsin, with significant guidance from Western advisers and institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, led to hyperinflation, widespread poverty, and the rise of oligarchic capitalism (Yavlinsky, 1998). Many Russians associated this turmoil with a Western-imposed "shock-therapy", that benefited a narrow elite while impoverishing the majority. The shock was vast, impacted the whole society, and brought about a deep crisis to the masses, as the country with decades of full employment, equality, relative social security and free education could not change and adapt instantly to the new conditions. During the 1990s the Russian political elites were deeply divided over the country's (desired) relationship with the West. While the liberal reformers of Yeltsin's circle viewed the West as a model to emulate, nationalist and conservative figures portrayed it as a predatory, exploitative entity which intends to weaken Russia (Sakwa, 2020, pp. 88–90). The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 was a critical turning point for the Russian public eye, which viewed it as a betrayal of the post-Cold War cooperation and a demonstration of Western unilateralism, hegemony and open disregard for Russian interests (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 18).

Russia's nineties resulted in a failed democratic experience. By the end of the decade, the public trust in Western-style democracy has suffered further, considerable erosion. Public opinion polls showed a growing preference for "order" over "freedom", and many Russians came to believe that the West has taken advantage of their country's temporary weakness (Rose *et al.*, 1998, pp. 143–145). Also, this was a message Vladimir Putin willingly spread (*Putin slams West for deceiving Russia*, 2010). Russian identity was increasingly defined in opposition to the West, this time not through communist ideology, but sovereigntist, nationalist and civilizational frames, which have become more and more prominent later, during the Putin-era. Hence, as Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2000, the foundation had already been laid for strategic and rhetorical shift away from liberal pro-Western orientation and toward a more adversarial conception of Russia's place in the world and its relations with the West. The shift went under gradually,

as marked by some of Putin's famous speeches, such as the one in the Bundestag in 2001, in the Duma in 2005 and in Munich in 2007 (*President Vladimir Putin addressed the Bundestag*, 2001; *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*, 2005; *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, 2007).

The fall of the Soviet Union brought Eurasianism to the front of post-Soviet intellectuals. As Marlene Laruelle (2008) wrote, Eurasianism posits that Russia and its periphery occupy a unique "median" position between Europe and Asia, stemming from a cultural "mix" of Slavic and Turko-Muslim peoples, thereby rejects Russia's perceived peripheral status to Europe and advocates for a messianic "third way." The roots of Eurasianism trace back to the "Orientalizers" of the 19th century, and the Pan-Slavists, who similarly to the Slavophiles before them, expressed bitter resentment over Russia's European-defined identity and sought recognition through the country's imperial expansion into Asia. Meanwhile, they often remained ambiguous and hesitant about a true embrace of Asian cultures, viewing the expansion as a strategic response to Western disdain rather than an inherent cultural affinity. The original Eurasianist doctrine emerged among interwar Russian émigrés in the 1920s and 30s and has gained renewed popularity as "Neo-Eurasianism" since the early 1990s. While specific Eurasianist theories remain complex and full of internal contradictions, its core idea of a distinct "Eurasian entity" for Russia has become increasingly widespread since the early 2000s, influencing academic discourse, governmental rhetoric in Russia and Turkic republics, and promoting an essentialist view of culture, ethnicity, and civilization to justify a uniquely Russian path and authoritarianism, often by negating Western models (Laruelle, 2008).

2.4.2 Russian identity and Europeanness

It is worth briefly discussing the polemic rising from the fact that while 75% of the Russian population lives in the European part of the country, Russia's population does not consider itself European. As of the latest published public opinion poll on this topic, conducted by the Levada Center (2021), 70% of the respondents did not consider themselves European, while only 27% did. This marks a considerable rise in the percentage of those not considering themselves European, as in 2008 they constituted only 52% of the respondents, while 35% did consider themselves European. The percentage of undecided respondents has significantly diminished, as in 2008 they 13%

told chose the option “it is difficult to say”, while in 2021 already only 3%. This suggests that the undecided group of respondents was almost entirely absorbed by the group with non-European identity, along with 7% of the Russians formerly possessing a European identity whose response shifted over time. (‘Russia and Europe’, 2021). Most likely this decrease in the percentage of Russians considering themselves European is not independent from the decades of anti-Western rhetorics dominating the Russian information space.

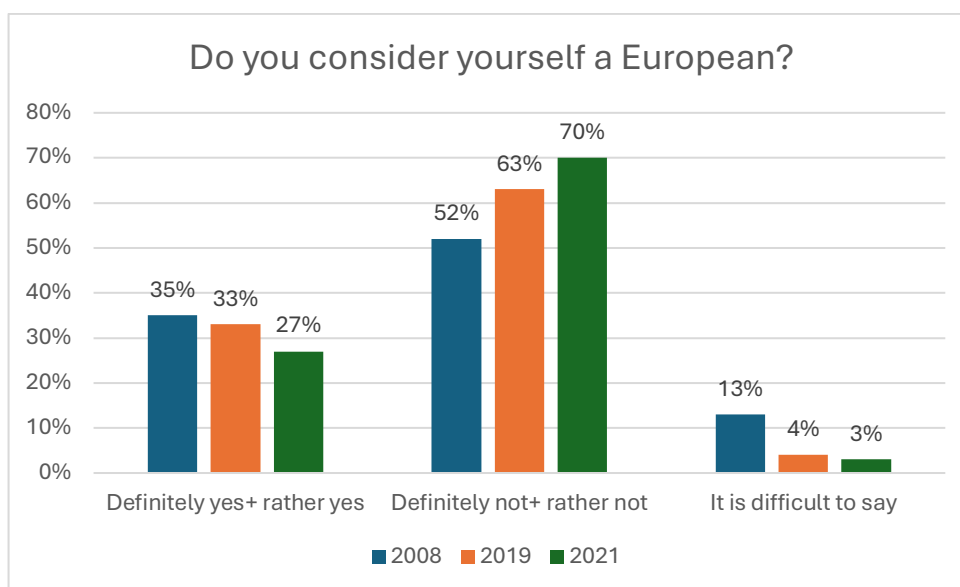


Figure 2. Visualized data from the publication 'Russia and Europe' Levada Center, 22.03.2021 <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/03/22/russia-and-europe/>

Russia’s cultural ties are different, and stronger to Europe than to Asia. The historic, major, culturally important cities, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg are located in Russia’s European part. Russian classical culture, including literature, ballet, music and painting, which educated Russians take pride in and what has a prominent place in the school curriculum, were not only impacted and influenced by the European culture but became an integral part of it. Countless artists, writers and authors of these esteemed and treasured parts of Russian classical culture lived and worked in Western Europe during their lifetime, while the same to Asian countries is a rare exception. Similarly, Russian Tsars often came from or married into European dynasties, and rarely to Asian ones, also, the Tsars’ court’s main language was French during the 18th and 19th century (besides other European languages such as German). French was not only the language of high culture and tellingly, the *lingua franca* across Europe but also among Russian nobility, and as a

result, contemporary Russian is still rich in French loan words (*French language influence on Russian*, 2023).

It is worth discussing the relation of Russia's non-European part and Russian identity. Over the last 500 years, since Ivan III, Russia — and its predecessor the Muscovy — was in a near-continuous territorial expansion. Territory-wise the largest conquest was that of Siberia (Kivelson, 2007), which clearly demonstrated the classic features of colonization (Etkind, 2013). The incorporation of Russia's Asian part into the national identity is a source of ambiguity. As Claudia Weiss (2006) put it, Siberia, which covers more than 50% of the Russian Federation, is more than barely one of its regions, but an integral part of Russia's self-perception. Not only did its wealth allow Russia to become part of the G8 States, but the typical descriptions of Russia as of “infinite expanses, freezing cold, rich in natural resources”, apply specifically to Siberia, significantly more than to “Russia proper” (Weiss, 2006).

In 2007, Claudia Weiss examined when and why Russians began to perceive Siberia as “theirs”, and an integral part of their nation, and how this “mental appropriation” took place. She argues that the Russian Geographical Society's work in the 19th century, through specific missions in Siberia made the territory's value known to Russian public, hence, played a crucial role in this mental appropriation. She also traces how Russia started to use Siberia (and the exhibits of the Russian Geographical Society from there) in its self-representation to the world at large at expos and universal exhibitions, from 1867. The use of Siberia in Russia's image presented to the external world served two distinct roles. The country's huge size, richness in minerals, other natural resources and political strength served as a demonstration of power to the West, while the creation of the image of an “other”, exoticized, fundamentally backwards and barbarian Siberia allowed the European Russia to appear more civilized. Interestingly, even when describing the Eastwards territorial expansion in the 19th century, contemporaries constantly refer to Western examples and parallels. For instance, she mentions that the Amur was widely regarded as the “Mississippi of the East”, and the “Wild East” in the popular imagination of Russian intelligentsia lived as Russia's own “Wild West” (Weiss, 2007).

Vyacheslav Morozov (2015) writes extensively about Russia's postcolonial identity, which sheds a different light to the question whether Russia views itself as part of the East or West. While Russia internalized and absorbed the Eurocentric worldview, it remained fundamentally different to the core European countries. He argues that the difference does not stem from culture, but from the country's position within the global capitalist system. As a semi-peripheral nation, it is neither part of the dominant "core", nor marginalized, and this "uneven and combined development" plays a key role in understanding its identity and behaviour. The Russian state, according to Morozov, has colonized its own periphery on behalf of the Western core, and suggests that the internal colonization was driven by external dependency. Despite its imperial actions, Russia has never been able to overcome the economic and normative dependency on the West. This dependency is a core element of its persistent "subaltern" status. The Putin regime's claim to defend "genuine Russian values" is presented not as an authentic, inherent identity, but as a negation of Western hegemony (Morozov, 2015b).

2.4.3 The West for contemporary Russia

Russian media and official rhetoric often portray the West (*zapad*) as a single, unanimous entity (Diligensky and Chugrov, 2000; Neumann, 2013). As Ekaterina Chimiris (2021) found, there is a traceable intention in the post-Crimea Russian official discourse to simplify the notion of the West, by the emerging concept of "the collective West to securitize the discourse towards the West" (Chimiris, 2022). Why this simplification might work, can probably be explained by Russians' overall scarce knowledge about the West. The majority of Russians have never been abroad, in August 2022, according to the last available dataset of such kind of the Levada Center, only a quarter of them possessed even a passport which allows for leaving the country. Overall, 20% of the respondents have ever been to any Western country (Levada Center, 2022). Also, the world-historic knowledge of the Western countries of Russians is often shallow, hence, the picture of the West as a single, collective entity is easy to accept, and to believe that the entire West is Russophobic becomes credible. According to the Kremlin's official rhetoric, since 2021 the "collective West" is waging a hybrid war against Russia, showcasing Russia as a "besieged fortress" (Yablokov, 2018) suffering the attacks of this united, single entity has received prevalence (Meduza, 2024b).

While the image of the “collective West” is oversimplified and easy to consume, there are countless stereotypes among Russians, and vivid associations of various and specific Western nations and countries. As the Soviet-born writer Elvira Bary (2025) has broken it down, France, Switzerland or Italy, is not viewed through negative lenses, probably, because Russia has not fought a war directly with any of them in the living memory. Hence, their image represents predominantly sophistication, beauty and wealth, the visit of which is a sought-after status symbol. The United Kingdom and Germany still are considered to be prestigious, but somewhat dangerous places for Russians, and as competitors of Russia, as a result of major wars and diplomatic clashes with both of them. German engineering and quality, along with prestigious academic life of the UK, make Russian elites to look for such products and send their children to study there, despite the harsh and currently ever-present anti-Western rhetorics. Formal Warsaw-pact countries are viewed as conquest, subordinated entities, and thankless in Russian understanding, for having wanted to break away via various uprisings and revolutions after being saved from fascism by the USSR. Many European countries, such as Austria or Spain do not incite strong emotions among Russians. The US, however, does, even though it is geographically distant. The most common associations about the US are materialistic nature, greed and stupidity, paired with admiration and envy towards its lifestyle (*Inside the MIND of Russians: What They REALLY Think About the West*, 2025).

In the Russian official rhetoric and discourse, there is a distinct notion for “Anglo-Saxons”, who are portrayed as bloodthirsty warmongers. This means the US and the United Kingdom, hence, the two countries, which are perceived as an opposition to Russia's interests and geopolitical goals. Graeme Herd (2024) identifies three main uses of the term “Anglo-Saxons”: as a representation of the collective West, as a depiction of a fascist elite, and as a label for dissenters within Russia as a “fifth column” (Herd, 2024). Some even recall the similarities between the use of “Anglo-Saxons” who stand behind all conflicts in the world and the antisemitic “Anglo-Jewish alliance” (Amashov, 2025). The enemy picture of “Anglo-Saxons” has been extensively used by Russia when targeting Ukrainian target audiences since the invasion of 2022 in their anti-Western propaganda (Riaboshtan, Pivtorak and Bilousenko, 2022).

Contemporary Russians still look at Europe as a desired place with good life. To counter and undermine this positive image, there is widespread mocking in the Russian discourse

over Europe's weakness and tolerant nature. These laughed-at traits are represented for instance by the fervent criticism of Eurovision (Rettman, 2023) and the widespread use of the slang term 'Gayropa' especially among political pundits and politicians (Suchland, 2018; Foxall, 2019). Nevertheless, Russian political elites still strive to keep their assets in the West, often in Europe and send their children to study there, while the same is a rare exception to Asian countries (Vinopal, 2022). After U.S. President Donald Trump's return to power and with the United States' perceived rapprochement to the Kremlin, the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia (SVR) embraced and brought to the spotlight in April 2025, an old-new, but barely used anti-European propaganda term for the enemy, which is "Еврофашизм" (Eurofascism) (SVR of Russia, 2025). This highly loaded term, which had its last "trend" in about 2015-2016 became yet again used by Russian propaganda outlets and talking heads a decade later, but apparently, did not spread beyond this bubble and is not used by the masses.

Europe for ordinary Russians, contrary to persistent official anti-Western rhetoric, still bears a highly positive meaning, which can be traced in colloquial terms as well. "Евроремонт" (*evroremont*) means a European-style renovation or repair of a flat, which refers to a higher standard of interior renovation. It typically implies modern design, the use of high-quality materials, and professional execution, often associated with Western European aesthetics and quality. The term contrasts with older, simpler Soviet-era renovations. "Европейский уровень" (European level or standard) generally means something that meets high quality, efficiency, or modern standards, implying it's comparable to what one would find in Western Europe. This term can refer to services, products, education, and infrastructure.

Similarly, "европейское качество" (European quality), marks a direct reference to the perceived high quality of goods, services, or manufacturing from Europe. It's often used as a selling point. Further along these lines, "евроокна" (eurowindow) specifically refers to modern, often double-glazed, plastic or wooden window frames, which are common in Europe and offer better insulation and soundproofing than older Soviet-era window frames. While the notions "европеец" and "европейка" (European) sound strictly descriptive at first about a person from Europe, it sometimes carries connotations related to lifestyle, manners, or worldview perceived as typically European. For instance, "он такой европеец" (he's such a European) implies that this person is cultured, has good

manners or is liberal, depending on the speaker's viewpoint. These simple examples from the colloquial and everyday Russian language usage clearly show that Europe for Russians is still widely associated with modernity, high-quality products and Western standards and aspirations. The widespread use of these words reflects the historical perception of Europe as a benchmark for progress and desirable living conditions.

2.4.4 The historical context of anti-Western propaganda in the Russian Empire, the USSR, and contemporary Russia

The Kremlin's contemporary anti-Western rhetoric is not a new phenomenon, but the latest iteration of deeply rooted historical narratives about Russia's identity, perceived and aspired place in the world and its relationship with "the West". In imperial Russia, starting from the 19th century, the intellectual debate between the Westernizers and Slavophiles gave room for the latter group of intellectuals to champion Russia's unique spiritual and communal path, and the vocal criticism of the West, painting it as morally corrupt, spiritually lost and bankrupt. This ideological schism laid the groundwork for the recurring narrative of Russian exceptionalism and suspicion of Western influence and influence-seeking. Leading figures such as Nikolai Danilevsky, for instance, argued for Russia's distinct "cultural-historical type", which would be inherently different from, and often perceived as superior to the Euro-Atlantic civilization (Alalykin-Izvekov, 2021).

The Bolshevik revolution drastically intensified anti-Western propaganda, framing the ideological struggle as a global class conflict. At the beginning of the Soviet period, the West's portrayal generally highlighted its decadence, and showcased it as an exploitative, hostile capitalistic bloc the primary goal of which is to undermine the success of the socialist experiment (Pipes, 1991). The interwar period brought about massive propaganda which focused on the "capitalist encirclement", painting Western powers as instigator of intervention and saboteurs (Vagts, 1956). The volume and intensity of anti-Western propaganda in the USSR have seen a surge during the Cold War. This era has seen pervasive and aggressive anti-Western propaganda. The ideology of "two-camps", articulated by Andrei Zhdanov, a key ideologue of the Stalin-era has divided the world into an "imperialistic, anti-democratic camp", led by the United States, and a "democratic, anti-imperialist camp", led by the USSR. The West, especially the U.S. and NATO, were depicted as aggressive, militaristic, morally bankrupt, and culturally decadent (as opposed

to the USSR, the guardian of moral virtues, striving for justice and peace) (Zubok, 2009). The propaganda gauged on Western hypocrisy, racism, poverty and corruption to underscore the perceived superiority of the Soviet system. Occasionally, “peace activists” or defectors from Western countries were sometimes used in domestic propaganda. Their role echoing the propagandas claims and accusations of the West has underpinned the narratives of Moscow in an eerily similar way to how the claims and presence of contemporary Western experts and was understood as a “proof” from within the enemy’s ranks.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the perceived rapprochement with the West made the volume of anti-Western narratives temporarily diminished. However, as this rapprochement soon gave way to a quickly growing disillusionment and resentment within Russia, and they quickly regained prevalence in the media. This resentment was fuelled by the NATO enlargement, the Kosovo intervention, and the perceived Western intervention in post-Soviet states. As Sergey Radchenko (2021) described it in his study on Russian reactions to the enlargement between 1993-1995, initially, the NATO enlargement was viewed by Moscow as acceptable, if inclusive Russia. It was seen as a way for Moscow to gain status once again as America’s important partner and ally. Once, however, Russia was excluded, Yeltsin’s media elite discourse has shifted to sharp opposition as a method to regain domestic legitimacy (Radchenko, 2021, pp. 772–773). The NATO intervention in Kosovo was another turning point, which was portrayed illegal, and as the embodiment of unilateral Western hubris, igniting that the West exploited Russia’s post-Soviet weakness. Tracey German notes how the intervention “prompted an enduring period of estrangement and alienation from the West” and negatively influenced Russian perceptions of security and power balance. Russian media and elites began describing it as “Western triumphalism,” and as a signal that the era of cooperation, aspirational friendship and amicable relations has ended (German, 2019). Ultimately, perceived Western interventions in the post-Soviet space consolidated the anti-Western narratives’ presence in Russian media outlets.

Post-Soviet imperial narratives, which claimed spheres of influence and explicitly denied the countries’ sovereign right to decide their own foreign policy have never disappeared from the forefront of Russian foreign policy thinking, but the mentioned events amplified them further. Russian outlets regularly invoked the concept of Russia’s privileged zone

of influence over the former Soviet space (ближнее зарубежье, the “*near abroad*”), and painted Western involvement, especially in countries such as Georgia, Ukraine or the Baltics, as a violation of historical and geopolitical norms (Morozov, 2015a; Burmester, 2024). During and after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Russian outlets routinely accused Western media, NATO and the U.S. of orchestrating anti-Russian propaganda, misrepresenting the events in South-Ossetia and deliberately silencing or marginalizing Russia’s position. Numerous testimonies (including state organs), indignantly called Western media outlets to account for showcasing Russia as the aggressor, as Russian coverage (both domestically and abroad) intended to whitewash Russia’s deeds and emphasise Georgia’s aggression. Even by-that-time Prime Minister Vladimir Putin himself repeated these claims, such as “*Nobody in the West wanted to see what really happened. They didn’t want to admit that the Georgian army started the war by shelling the city of Tskhinvali. Instead, they accused Russia*” (Premier.gov.ru, 2008).

In 2007, when Estonia moved a Soviet-era bronze soldier statue away from the city centre in Tallinn, Russian media launched campaigns framing the action as an example of cultural erasure and utter Western disrespect for Russia’s historic legacy. Media narratives often focused more on memory policing than actual fact-checking, and particularly, state media galvanized ethnic Russians by portraying the move as a conscious attempt to rewrite history and discouraging Soviet victory memory (Jankowicz, 2019). During and post-Euromaidan, the Kremlin introduced the narrative of Western-engineered regime change via the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine and accused the West of pressuring Ukraine into a Western path (against its own will and interests), undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and weaponizing democracy (EU vs Disinfo, 2024). This narrative portrayed the EU and NATO as expansionist and ideologically hostile, in order to justify the illegal annexation of Crimea and the alleged protection of ethnic Russians. The grand-scale study of Ecaterina Locoman and Richard R. Lau (2024) which examined Russian state-run TV narratives over critical junctures of Ukraine between 2013-2022, found that the media constructed an identity-constituting narrative that elevated Russian leaders and belittled their Western counterpart post-crisis, mirroring geopolitical tensions. Ukraine’s framing often happened with WWII-vocabulary, and the study detected Russia’s efforts to shift the blame onto the West as well (Locoman and Lau, 2024). Ralf Roloff and Pál Dunay (2018) noted that the way Russian media portrays the West in the post-truth age, utilizes disinformation and moral narratives to underscore

perceived threats to Russian sovereignty. By fostering a unified message that capitalizes on historic grievances and current geopolitical tensions, Russian media successfully shapes domestic perceptions of the West and support the Kremlin's broader strategic objectives. This way they do not only reinforce the legitimacy of the Russian government and its deeds but also seek to justify its actions on the global stage (Roloff and Dunay, 2018).

In the 2000s-2010s, research shows that the Russian media systematically labelled Western involvement as hostile or conspiratorial, targeting countries within Russia's perceived sphere of influence (Pomerantsev, 2015). Richard Sakwa analysed how the Russian state used the media to construct external enemies between 2000 and 2010. This practice frequently involved portraying Western involvement in the post-Soviet space as a deliberate strategy to undermine Russian interests and sovereignty and served to reinforce the image of Western hostility and conspiratorial behaviour (Sakwa, 2010).

2.4.5 Structural changes in media ownerships - whose anti-Western propaganda is it?

Skimming through the history of anti-Western narratives, one might have the impression that nothing changes. These messages have always been present in the information space of Russia and its predecessors, probably with a varying intensity, but otherwise largely in the same way. It is crucial, however, to take into consideration the changes in the media structures and legal environment over time, and to understand *whose anti-Western narratives were these?* Simply, because there is a substantial difference between anti-Western narratives appearing in a relatively free media space, as part of the public discourse, in an environment where the fundamental right of the freedom of speech is granted and journalistic ethics do more or less apply; and anti-Western messages orchestrated by the state's entire propaganda machine, in an information space under massive censorship, where non-alignment with the state's narratives is a crime punished by the law.

After the USSR's collapse in 1991, the state monopoly on media ended, the state control over it was dismantled, and the era of privatization started. Winners of the privatization, oligarchs such as Vladimir Gusinsky (Media-Most/NTV) and Boris Berezovsky (ORT)

seized the opportunity and built media empires that competed both commercially and politically. These media barons (or “clans”) used their outlets as strategic weapons in political rivalries (Nemtsov, 1999). Alongside with these empires, independent outlets like *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* or *Echo Moskvy* flourished, offered investigative content, and often pro-Western reporting (Cooper, 2020). This era saw genuine press freedom, although tied to oligarchic interests and state subsidies (Quast, 2006). Anti-Western narratives were part of a pluralistic debate, rather than state-driven propaganda.

Vladimir Putin’s accession to power as president in 2000 marked a turning point on the Russian media market. The dismantling of independent outlets began nearly immediately. NTV was effectively taken over by Gazprom, and regional media fell under federal control (*Freedom of the Press - Russia*, 2006). In 2004, the last live TV political talk show was terminated, along with the last political satirical show, political “stop lists” were established barring from state TV the political opponents, and unwanted critics (Lipman, 2005b).³ By the mid-2000s, 70-80% of Russian media was state-controlled or Kremlin-aligned. The most watched channels by that time were Channel One (51% owned by the state through various entities (State Media Monitor, 2024b)), *Rossiya* (owned by the Russian government (State Media Monitor, 2024a) and NTV (owned by the largest Russian media conglomerate, Gazprom Media (State Media Monitor, 2024c)). All the three (and many more) transmitted the official narrative, although with differences in style. For instance, a news anchor on Channel One from 2006 to 2013 took pride in their work compared to the other channels, “*you can do propaganda, but you can’t let yourself fall below a certain level*”, told (Yaffa, 2019). Key figures such as Konstantin Ernst (initially a producer with Channel One, turned into “Putin’s unofficial minister of propaganda”) and Dmitry Kiselyov (*Rossiya*) turned into architects of state-crafted narratives, which emphasized the West as an interventionist threat, maliciously planning new colour-revolutions (Yaffa, 2019; Gessen, 2022). Anti-Western messaging has shifted from independent critique to a strategic narrative coordinated by the Kremlin.

By 2008, most major outlets were aligned, Gazprom-Media, National Media Group, and *Rossiya Segodnya* formed a de facto pro-Kremlin media bloc (Korotaev, 2022). Independent voices like *Echo Moskvy* survived under narrow constraints, as they were

³ Later on, new live shows were launched, for instance, *Время покажет* (Time Will Tell) launched in September 2014, is a live political talk show.

allowed to operate but tightly monitored (Remnick, 2008). Messaging has become even more coordinated, shaped and directed by the Kremlin, by spin-doctors such as Vladislav Surkov. He fused nationalist pride with anti-Western conspiracy theories, and these narratives were entirely normalized across state platforms (Pynnöniemi, 2019). Anti-Western content in these years already served both domestic mobilization and control over the political discourse.

The 2010s marked a foreign-policy shift for Russian media, as the Kremlin launched RT (existing since 2005) and Sputnik (since 2014) as global broadcasters as a media empire consisting of numerous outlets worldwide, to challenge and call out Western narratives. These outlets employ strategic disinformation, deepen polarization, spread conspiracy theories, “locker-room-humour”, and fake neutrality to undermine Western democracies (Yang, McCabe and Hindman, 2024). Studies show repeated framing of the West as hypocritical, as part of a broader ideological weaponization of the media (Cushman and Avramov, 2021). Domestically, the events of 2014 (notably the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine) brought about a turn to international politics and topics in the centralized, Kremlin-owned media empire. For instance, an ever-since-popular, live political talk show, *Время покажет* (Time Will Tell) was launched in September 2014, with foreign policy focus, — which some even call a “fixation with the United States” (Yaffa, 2019) — and massive anti-Western agitation.

The strengthening anti-Western rhetoric and agitation by the Kremlin and its media empire served as a tool to cover the continuous autocratization of the Putin-regime. The regime strived for labelling and eliminating domestic adversaries, rivals and all those perceived to threaten the Kremlin’s limitless power. In this spirit, the infamous foreign agent law (Federal Law No. 121-FZ) was accepted, requiring any person or organization receiving any form of support from outside Russia or deemed to be under foreign influence to register as a “foreign agent”. The law has undergone numerous changes ever since, radically expanding the circle of those affected by all its negative consequences. In 2022 Federal Law No. 255-FZ has replaced all previous “foreign agent” legislation, effectively allowing for labelling any entity, legal or natural person a “foreign agent”, even without foreign funding, who takes part in the Russian public discourse and whose narratives do not fit the Kremlin’s (The Moscow Times, 2025b). The “foreign agent” labelling carries heavy Soviet-era connotations, and the legal structure itself targets

individuals and organizations which are viewed as an enemy of the state by the Kremlin. It suggests that opposition to any of the Kremlin's deeds or measures might exclusively come from foreign powers which seek to undermine the country. "Foreign agents" do not only have to showcase before each and every material they publish, create or present a declaration that they are foreign agents, but among many other restrictions, they are barred from participation in awareness-raising activities, receiving support from local authorities, holding public office, participating in election commissions, serving on public advisory boards (Human Rights Watch, 2025; The Moscow Times, 2025b). The "foreign agent" laws forced to close down or into exile the remaining independent media, TV Rain and Novaya Gazeta left, along with most of the editorial team of Lenta.ru, who founded a new outlet already in Riga, Latvia (Nguyen, 2018). The use of troll farms, bots and the search manipulator became standard in the hands of the Kremlin to sway the popular opinion according to their goals.

With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, all remaining media outlets in Russia had to become instruments of the country's war effort, with the sole exception of a handful, small-reach outlets, and independent journalists, who can only write in incognito (The Moscow Times, 2025a). Widespread and effective censorship was introduced, the repression and criminal prosecution of those voicing different opinions from the official rhetoric became the standard (Maroknovskaya *et al.*, 2023). The technological background of censorship and repression has undergone a major evolution (Erickson, 2024). Hundreds of thousands of foreign websites were banned, along with major social media platforms, as a consequence of which, those Russians wanting to acquire information from outside the tightly controlled domestic information space, have to take efforts such as using VPN services, which requires at least certain affinity and tech-savviness, excluding the overwhelming majority from even the possibility of trying it out. Furthermore, the Kremlin does not only ban and actively block the use of VPNs, but also campaigns against them, suggesting that they present the *real* threat to private or sensitive data (Times, 2023; Kitson, 2025). While Russian people are largely cut from information outside of the Kremlin-controlled information space, the central anti-Western narratives, which are not to be questioned by anyone, are stronger and are amplified more than ever.

To summarize, anti-Western narratives in the Russian media space appear continuous, but the shifts in media ownership and the consolidation of informal channels of control

which went hand-in hand with a swift process of autocratization heavily influencing the impact of these narratives. The freshly privatized openness of the market of the 1990s, characterized by oligarch-owned, pluralistic structure gave room for fragmented discourse, and within its frames, anti-Western narratives. The 2000s brought state-aligned consolidation, and the strategic nationalistic framing of topics and agenda setting prevailed. From the 2010s digital suppression became stronger, and the securitization of the strategic narratives became more palpable for instance, in the form of the “foreign agent” laws, which served to make the work of those entities and organizations impossible, which are deemed undesirable by the Kremlin. Pinpointing domestic actors as subversives serving foreign interests fitted in the communication patterns of the regime. In the 2022 crackdown the last dissenters were shut down, the Russian information space is under near-total control and is saturated by pro-war- and anti-Western propaganda. The narratives of this monolithic propaganda apparatus are the backbone of the Kremlin-controlled information architecture, enforced by law, and aligned with the military aggression.

2.5 Propaganda

2.5.1 Applicable propaganda models and theories

For the understanding of Russian domestic propaganda, its functioning and methods, it is worth first looking at the existing key propaganda models and theories. Herman and Chomsky, in their seminal work *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), proposed a model arguing that media content is systematically filtered to serve the interests of powerful elites. Although their study applied initially to the media environment of the United States, its filters can be conceptually adapted to understand the state-controlled media environments, like the one of Russia. The model describes five filters, namely: ownership, advertising, sourcing, “flak”, and anti-communism (or an updated "common enemy" ideology).

The filters demonstrate how the structural characteristics of media systems produce biased content (Herman and Chomsky, 2021). In the Russian context, state ownership and funding directly dictate content, while "flak" from the state actively suppresses dissenting voices. Critically, the "anti-communism" filter can be reinterpreted as a pervasive "anti-Western" or "anti-liberal" ideology, framing the national narrative. The selection and

appearance of Western experts, particularly those critical of Western policies or supportive of Russian perspectives, can be seen as a strategic bypass of the usual "sourcing" filter. By presenting "Western" voices that align with the Kremlin's narrative, these talk shows lend an apparent objectivity or "insider validation" to their anti-Western rhetoric, effectively neutralizing potential "flak" from audiences who might otherwise be sceptical of purely domestic critiques.

Harold Lasswell's linear model of communication (1948), which was one of the first and most influential models of communication, analyses communication in one question (which consists of five basic questions): "Who?", "Says What?", "In What Channel?", "To Whom?", and "With What Effect?". These questions pinpoint to the five fundamental components of the communicative process: the sender, the message, the channel, the receiver, and the effect. (Steinberg, 2007; Sapienza, Iyer and Veenstra, 2018). Although at the beginning, this model was conceived specifically for the analysis of mass communication like radio, television, and newspapers, it has been applied to various other fields ever since, and many theorists understand it as a general model of communication. If we break down the strategic communication inherent in Russian political talk shows to the elements offered by Laswell, we receive the following responses.

Lasswell's questions (1948)	Responses in the context of Russian political talk show
Who?	The state-controlled media apparatus and, by extension, the Kremlin, acting as the ultimate source and gatekeeper of information.
Says What?	The specific narratives propagated, such as the decline of the West, its perceived hypocrisy, Russophobia, weakness and internal divisions. Western experts are crucial here as they are strategically selected to articulate, confirm, or implicitly validate these narratives.
In Which Channel?	Political talk shows on major state television channels serve as the primary "channel," leveraging their broad reach and the perceived authority of television. However, given that the most engaging fragments of these shows are also circulated on various social media

	and messaging platforms, the circle of secondary channels is broader.
To Whom?	The target audience is primarily the domestic Russian population, but increasingly, these programs are also accessible globally, serving an international influence function.
With What Effect?	The intended "effect" is to cultivate and reinforce anti-Western sentiment, bolster support for Kremlin policies, and delegitimize Western criticisms (Lasswell, 1948). The presence of Western experts aims to enhance the credibility of these effects by presenting "proof" from the "other side."

Table 1. Lasswell (1948)'s questions and the responses in the context of Russian political talk shows.

The media has an important agenda-setting function as well. The agenda-setting theory of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) posited that the media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. *"In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality"* resume the authors (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 176). By repeatedly featuring Western experts discussing specific negative aspects of Western society, politics, or international relations (e.g., economic instability, social decay, aggressive foreign policy), Russian talk shows elevate these issues to salience in the public consciousness. The consistent appearance of these figures ensures that the "problems" of the West remain at the forefront of the audience's attention, thereby shaping their cognitive agenda regarding Western nations. The theory was later further developed. McCombs (2005) incorporated into it the second-level agenda setting or attributed agenda-setting, which already focuses not only on what topics are salient but also on how they are portrayed, which attributes are highlighted, which tone is used, and what is the framing. This way there is a distinction between first-level salience (topics) and second-level salience (attributes) (McCombs, 2005). As the Russian state media is known for not only emphasizing certain topics (e.g. NATO, EU sanctions) but consistently framing the West as decadent, threatening, or hypocritical, it is a textbook case of second-level agenda-setting.

The agenda-building theory emphasizes how media agendas are influenced by elites, public relations, or political actors, which is important in understanding state-orchestrated

propaganda systems (Wanta, Golan and Lee, 2004). In the Russian context, Kremlin-aligned actors tightly control media narratives through top-down agenda-building, reinforcing dominant narratives like “Russia as fortress under siege” by the West. The intermedia agenda setting also should be mentioned, as studies show that media outlets influence each-other’s agenda (Harder, Sevenans and Van Aelst, 2017, p. 275). Even though Russian domestic propaganda shows strong centralized control, intermedia dynamics still do appear when fringe or online sources introduce certain narratives that later migrate to mainstream state media. The network agenda setting model of Gou and McCombs (2011) focused on associative patterns of topics and attributes across the media. Their study explored the relationship between media and public agenda networks: *“Network agenda setting explores how networks of issues and attributes are transferred from the media to the public.”* (Guo and McCombs, 2011, p. 22). Russian propaganda consistently connects Western institutions (e.g. NATO, EU) with negative issues like “decay,” “war,” and “Russophobia” effectively anchoring it in people’s minds and strengthening these primary associations.

Closely related to agenda-setting, the framing theory explains how the media frames issues and how these frames influence the way audiences interpret and understand what is presented to them. Entman (1993) described framing as the process of selecting *“some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”* (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In Russian talk shows, Western experts are meticulously framed. They might be presented as “insightful realists” who understand Russia better than their own governments, “brave dissidents” exposing Western hypocrisy, or even “useful idiots” whose naive views can be easily ridiculed and used to bolster a pre-determined narrative (Takácsy, 2024b). This strategic framing dictates how their statements are received and integrated into the overall anti-Western message. In Russian media, both framing and agenda-setting with regards to the West are palpable. The robust study of Field, Klinger, Wintner, Pan, Jurafsky and Tsvetkov (2018), which analysed 13 years (100 000 articles) of the Russian newspaper Izvestia, identified a clear strategy of distraction. In the month directly following an economic downturn in Russia, articles mention the U.S. more frequently than before, emphasizing U.S. moral failings and security threats (Field *et al.*, 2018).

Audience reception and interpretation are also important factors to consider understanding the impact and functioning of propaganda in a broader sense, and, in a narrower one as of the impact of Western experts in Russian political talk shows. Different segments of Russian audience may interpret the appearance of Western experts, although the direct measurement is challenging, given the scarcity of available data. Theoretical approaches to audience reception, however, provide valuable frameworks for considering these potential interpretations. The mentioned model of Lasswell (1948), inspired by the persuasive propaganda techniques of the period between the two world wars, treats the audience an entirely passive entity. The model captures the asymmetry between the persuasive communicator and posits that the message which reaches the audience through the media, directly affects the audience (Lasswell, 1948). The limitations of Lasswell's model are that it is a linear one, pictures communication as a one-way process, disregards any potential for feedback from the audience, assuming it entirely passive (Cardama and Borges, no date), making it somewhat less relevant in the era of social media.

In contrast to this the “encoding/decoding” model of Stuart Hall (1980), emphasizes active audience. This model posits that the messages of the media are “encoded” by producers with a “preferred” meaning, but “decoded” by audiences based on their socio-cultural context, their existing beliefs and media literacy level. The three kinds of readings are dominant or preferred, negotiated and oppositional (Hall, 1980). Dominant or preferred reading of political talk shows employing Western experts by Russian audiences might entail the acceptance of anti-Western messages reinforced by the foreign expert figure's presence, as they view them as legitimate source of information and their persona as a validation of the message. This is the intended and desired outcome for the state media. Negotiated reading in this context means that the audience generally accepts anti-Western narratives but might question certain aspects, such as the expert's true motivation (they might ask, for instance, whether they only do this for money) or the extremity of certain claims. They might acknowledge the expert's viewpoint but keep a critical distance from it. The oppositional reading means that the audience rejects the entire premise, sees through the manipulation and how the show frames the Western expert, and sees the whole performance as propaganda or disinformation. Such a reading requires a high degree of media literacy and access to alternative information.

The cultivation theory of George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) suggests that prolonged and consistent exposure to media content over time can shape the perceptions of reality of the audience, especially their beliefs about the social world (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). If Russian audiences are consistently exposed to talk shows featuring Western experts validating narratives of Western decline, moral bankruptcy, or hostile intentions, over time, these mediated realities can create and strengthen a belief and trust in these negative portrayals, regardless of their factual accuracy. The recurring presence of Western figures, seemingly confirming these narratives, can deepen their resonance and plausibility for the audience.

2.5.2 Misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and their historical usage

Information manipulation exists in many shapes and forms this is why it is crucial to establish clear conceptual boundaries between them. Misinformation refers to inaccurate or false information, without malicious intent to deceive. It is often the result of a genuine error, misunderstanding, or accidental sharing of outdated or not verified content. Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017) define it as simply “false connection, false context, imposter content, manipulated content, or fabricated content that is shared without harmful intent” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). The key characteristic here is the absence of a deliberate purpose to mislead. In contrast to this, disinformation is deliberately false or inaccurate information, spread with the intention to deceive, mislead or manipulate the audience. It is a calculated act, which is designed to achieve a specific outcome, that can be also political or strategic. Disinformation campaigns involve the knowing fabrication of news stories, forging documents, intentional distortion of facts, the creation of deceptive narratives and the creation of deepfakes. Disinformation is historically a key tactic in black propaganda during wartime, and a cornerstone of Soviet “active measures” aimed at weakening adversaries and shaping global perceptions (Godson and Shultz, 1985). From the three concepts, propaganda is the broadest, which refers to systematic dissemination of information, ideas or doctrines in an often biased or misleading way. As Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell (2018) put it, typically, it is used to influence public opinion, attitudes and behaviours, usually for political or ideological objectives. While propaganda can, and often does employ disinformation tactics (for instance, fabricates a story to support a given political agenda), it is not limited to falsehoods, but can utilize half-truths, truths and emotional appeals, along with agenda-

setting to persuade and mobilize a target audience. Propaganda's key features include its systemic nature, its aim to persuade and mobilize, and its often overt attempts to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour, to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. Based on the acknowledgement of the source and the accuracy of the information, there are three categories. White propaganda identifies its sources correctly and contains accurate information. It is typically positive propaganda and aims at increasing the credibility of "the good guy", and pertinent examples might be events promoting pride and patriotism such as large international sports events. Black propaganda uses false sources and spreads inaccurate, deceptive information. The Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, for instance, applied this tool extensively in their campaigns. Gray propaganda draws from the attributes of both, making it more difficult to categorise at either, therefore can be effective even to target educated audiences who otherwise can confidently spot black or white propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018).

The roots of propaganda date back to ancient times. As Philip M. Taylor (2013) wrote in his book *overviewing propaganda throughout history*, already the ancient Greeks acknowledged that it is a fundamental pillar of an effective society. He scrutinizes the intent behind propaganda, and pinpoints that as the root cause of wars, not persuasive techniques themselves. However, he concludes that the historical function of propaganda has not been positive at all, as it served fuelling fear, ignorance and hypocrisy in the societies (Taylor, 2013). What certainly was a major development in the efficiency of propaganda, was the rapid development of mass communication technology, such as satellite television and telefax which brought the first changes forward to the printed press, TV and radio (Granville, 2012). The two World Wars incited unprecedented state-led efforts to mobilize domestic populations and demonize the enemies. The Cold War became an ideological battleground where both sides extensively used propaganda to promote their systems, ideologies and undermine the domestic opposition. Disinformation, in its modern form has also become an often-used tool during the Cold War. The Soviet Union perfected its "active measures", which consisted among others of deliberate, covert campaigns aimed at sowing discord in Western societies via the spread of false information embedded in catchy narratives and discrediting opponents (Godson and Shultz, 1985). Misinformation, being largely unintentional, has most likely always

been present in human communication, and its presence amplified the speed of the spread of rumours and gossips.

The use of these tools is deeply entrenched in Russian history. In the Tsarist era, propaganda focussed on reinforcing the tsar's positive image, as a benevolent ruler, aided by censorship and patriotic messaging, while as a response to this, revolutionary propaganda called for the overthrow of the government and the tsar, and the creation of a new society based on socialist basis (Travis, 1981; Pearl, 1993). It was, however, the Soviet Union to elevate propaganda and disinformation to core instruments of state power. Ideological indoctrination through Marxism-Leninism permeated all layers of society, guided by dedicated institutions such as the Agitprop department (отдел агитации и пропаганды) of the Central Committee with similar local and territorial bodies. Each media outlet, cultural institution and education program served to disseminate the party line, demonize class enemies and strengthen the faith in the Soviet leadership. Richard Pipes (1991) notes that the Bolsheviks "*saw the world as a battlefield of irreconcilable forces, manipulated by hidden elites*" (Pipes, 1991, p. 15), and this worldview gave ample room for conspiratorial and propagandistic narratives. The ideological rigidity created an environment where facts became of secondary importance to "truth" defined by the party. In addition to this, the "active measures" used meant the systematic spread of disinformation, aimed at influencing global perceptions through forged documents, if need be, false rumours and the widespread manipulation of foreign media (Shirayev and Zubok, 2015).

In the 1990s, the world initially saw an explosion of media freedom and pluralism following the collapse of the USSR. New, private TV channels, radio stations and newspapers were launched, often owned and financed by powerful oligarchs who used them to advance their own political and business interests (Oates, 2013). In this relatively chaotic but diverse information environment various narratives co-existed, hence, propaganda was not monolithic or state-directed in a manner experienced later. The Putin-era marked a systematic reassertion of the state control over media, fundamentally altering the entire domestic information space. Striving for a "managed-" or "sovereign democracy", the Kremlin dismantled independent media strongholds. By the mid 2000s, all major television channels were under state- or state-affiliated ownership and editorial direction (Lipman, 2009b). The highly centralized media environment allowed

for a systematic deployment of propaganda to shape popular opinion, promote the vision of a strong state and national unity around anti-Western narratives.

2.5.3 The role of emotional appeals

Propaganda, particularly in its televised and performative format thrives on emotional resonance. Russian political talk shows are not solely platforms for information dissemination. They are arenas designed to evoke emotions in the audience, engage and involve them emotionally meanwhile indoctrinate them, as the term “agitainment” pinpoints as well (Tolz and Teper, 2018). The presence of Western experts can significantly amplify or modify this psychological impact, contributing to a broader strategy of psychological warfare. Emotional appeals are a powerful rhetorical tool, which is often more effective in convincing the audience or shaping their attitudes than purely logical arguments. This is especially true in contexts of high arousal or perceived threat. Emotional triggers can bypass critical thinking and lead to greater compliance or acceptance of messages (Cialdini, 2007). In political talk shows, hosts and guests frequently employ emotionally charged or even vulgar language, vivid imagery, and personal anecdotes in order to evoke strong reactions from the audience.

Specific emotional triggers in these talk shows can be firstly: fear. These programmes often leverage fear appeals and present the West as an existential threat to Russia’s security, sovereignty or traditional values and way of life. Western experts appearing and confirming the narratives of NATO aggression, Western encroachment or the simple moral decay of liberal societies can further fuel these fears. Their “insider” status, even if manipulated, can lend credibility to their warnings and make a perceived threat appear more immediate and real. Second, political talk shows frequently cultivate anger and resentment towards the West, and portray it as hypocritical, dishonest, and disrespecting Russia’s legitimate interests. Those Western experts who articulate grievances against their own governments or governmental policies, criticise Western sanctions or highlight the perceived double standards, provide “evidence” to the viewers from within, and can fuel a sense of injustice and indignation. The external validation of internal grievances can be highly potent. Third, the core aim of these shows is to foster deep distrust of Western motives, intentions and institutions. Western experts who express scepticism about their government’s narratives or expose real or perceived, exaggerated flaws in

Western democratic processes contribute to an overall atmosphere of suspicion and cynicism while reinforcing the idea that the West it better not to be trusted.

The presence of Western figures amplifies the psychological impact (which includes but is not limited to the above listed emotions) in several ways. On the one hand, it creates a sense of cognitive consonance for the audience: if a "Westerner" agrees with the anti-Western narrative, it reduces the cognitive dissonance that might arise from uncritically accepting a purely domestic, state-sponsored critique. This perceived internal validation makes the message feel more authentic and less like mere propaganda. On the other hand, it can foster a sense of "us vs. them" while simultaneously showing that even "they" have internal divisions (while "we" are united and stand strong) perhaps suggesting that "our" view is the "correct" or "realistic" one. In addition to these, the performance of the Western expert, shall they appear confused, frustrated, or genuinely aligned, is part of the psychological theatre. Their participation, regardless of personal intent, serves to normalize the anti-Western discourse by presenting it as a legitimate viewpoint, even from those "inside" the targeted "enemy" camp (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011). All this can lead to cultivation of grievance, fostering a perpetual sense of victimhood or righteous indignation, which can then be harnessed for political mobilization or to justify aggressive foreign policy.

2.5.4 Occultism, spiritualism and the rise of war-psychics

Russian official rhetoric frames the war against Ukraine as a war against the entire West, and essentially, as a "Holy War". The Russian Orthodox Church published a decree in 2024, claiming that Russia wages the current war against "Western globalism" and "Satanism" (*Decree of the XXV World Russian People's Council "The Present and Future of the Russian World"*, 2024). The escalation of who this war is fought against is noteworthy. At Vladimir Putin's announcement of the full-scale invasion, on the 24 February 2022 the "special military operation's" proclaimed target was limited to the allegedly nazi "Kyiv regime" (Kremlin.ru, 2022a). In September the same year, he already claimed Russia would fight against Satanism.

"Let me repeat that the dictatorship of the Western elites targets all societies, including the citizens of Western countries themselves. This is a challenge to all.

This complete renunciation of what it means to be a human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a “religion in reverse” – pure Satanism. Exposing false messiahs, Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: “By their fruits ye shall know them.” These poisonous fruits are already obvious to people, and not only in our country but also in all countries, including many people in the West itself” (Kremlin.ru, 2022b).

Framing the war as the “de-satanization” of Ukraine became mainstream, politicians such as Aleksey Pavlov, assistant secretary on the Security Council of Russia, accused Ukraine that it was turned into a cult. *"Using internet manipulation and psychotechnologies, the new regime turned Ukraine from a sovereign state to a totalitarian hypersect,"* he claimed (TASS, 2022). RIA Novosti covered their alleged findings of the remnants of a witch coven where Ukrainian soldiers consecrated weapons with blood (Gault, 2022).

The Kremlin’s propaganda machine worked hard on spreading the disinformation of the allegedly growing cult of Satan in Ukraine and hostility towards Orthodox Christianity, picturing the country which must be cleaned from this decay and degradation. As the Bulgarian fact-checker Vanessa Nikolova wrote, a key element of this information campaign was a video, taken in a church, with strange happenings at first view, presented as the deliberate desecration of the building and as a satanic ritual. In reality, a Ukrainian folk custom, the *vertep*, the traditional Ukrainian Christmas puppet theatre and folk drama kept since the 16th century was filmed (Nikolova, 2023). The Russian Orthodox Church and the Kremlin is strongly intertwined, that their rhetorics are blended too. Aligning with the Kremlin’s power interests, Patriarch Kirill ceaselessly agitates against Ukrainians, the West, echoes the Kremlin’s propaganda, and as a separate institute on paper, gives an extra layer of credibility to the messages voiced. For instance, he announced that partaking and dying in the war in Ukraine washes away all the sins, hence, the dead go immediately to heaven (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022).

Even besides religiousness, esotericism, and the blended version of the two are an existing phenomenon in the Russian media space. Esoteric thinking and conspiracy theories have become prevalent features of Russian media discourse since the early 2000s, especially about the West. Their popularity is not entirely accidental, but rather a product of

ideological engineering, the restructuring of the media landscape, and broader cultural currents which emerged in the new, post-Soviet Russian realm. The collapse of the USSR meant an immense epistemological crisis for the masses of Russian society. The disintegration of Marxist-Leninist state ideology left an ideological vacuum, which was filled gradually by a set of new ideas: some of them were nationalistic, some religious, some simply consumeristic, and some esoteric. In this new climate, when all things which seemed to last forever but ended abruptly (Yurchak, 2013), conspiracy theories provided a sense of order and meaning in a world which was perceived chaotic and externally manipulated. As Ilya Yablokov (2015) argues, conspiracy theories and narratives building on these were a tool of identity construction and helped to build a cohesive post-Soviet narrative by building an image of a besieged Russia surrounded by hostile powers (Yablokov, 2015, p. 308).

The integration of esoteric ideas into Russian media was a phenomenon, which fitted in a broader trend of “occulture”, the overlap of occult ideas with popular culture and politics. Eliot Borenstein (2011) has shown how “New Age nationalism” and mystical interpretations of Russian exceptionalism gained significant visibility in the 1990s, and how later they were co-opted by state-aligned media. Key figures such as Alexandr Dugin played a major role in this co-optation process and has effectively blended geopolitics and mystical Eurasianism. Dugin’s work called Fourth Political Theory (2012) promotes the open rejection of Western rationalism and liberalism, and advocates for a spiritually charged, anti-modernist worldview which resonated well with conspiracy-prone audiences (Dugin, 2012). Andreas Umland (2022) pinpointed that pseudo-academic tendencies, represented by Dugin and Lev Gumilyov contributed heavily to the “intellectual deformation” of the Russian elite by Manichean ideas. He blamed this estrangement and deformation for Russia’s increasing secession from Europe and argued that these pseudo-academic tendencies prepared the war against Ukraine too (Umland, 2022). Starting from the 2000s, state-controlled outlets began the systemic incorporation of conspiracy theories into their coverages, to discredit the West and the Western-minded (or simply accused with Western-mindedness) liberal opposition. As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss (2014) wrote, Russian media weaponized disinformation by saturating the information space with contradictory narratives, out of which many drew on conspiratorial themes, such as Western plans to destabilize Russia through “colour

revolutions” or to corrupt Russian society through subversive ideas and liberal values (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014, pp. 10–12).

Yablokov’s work (2018) is a comprehensive study on how conspiracy theories have been institutionalized in Russian media. He documents the rise of TV personalities and programs devoted to exploring “hidden truths”, where geopolitical analysis is fused with massive esotericism. These shows often portray the West as a sinister, globalist, dark force bent on world domination. These media narratives are not fringe, but deeply embedded in the mainstream discourse, and reinforce a Manichean worldview in which Russia represents the spiritual and moral ground as opposed to the West that symbolizes deception and decay (Yablokov, 2018, pp. 112–134). This strategy serves both domestic and foreign policy goals. On the one hand, domestically, it undermines and delegitimizes dissent portraying opposition parties or critical voices as puppets of the shady Western elites. On the other hand, internationally, it fits into a broader narrative of civilizational conflict, showing Russia as part of the “global resistance” against the liberal world order. As Marlene Laruelle (2025) observed, the popularity of esoteric and conspiratorial thinking is closely linked to post-modern distrust of universal truths, and the erosion of faith in institutions. These trends are present world-wide but were certainly exploited and harnessed by the Russian state media for its own purposes (Laruelle, 2025).

Proneness to believing conspiracy theories and esoteric ideas has a long history in the Russian society. As Andrew Gough (2013) wrote, Russia has been a fertile soil for mysticism for centuries and many cultivators of magic, Jewish mysticism, geomancy, divination and other disciplines made their luck and found their way there. Among the rulers there has been receptiveness to their services too. For instance, Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century is known to have consulted Finnish magicians, Tsar Boris Godunov tried to hire an English alchemist. Theosophy, spiritualism and freemasonry were also popular, and as Gough argues, these three had deeply impressed the young and ambitious Stalin (an orthodox seminar dropout himself). This way these ideas had an impact on early Russian communism too (Montefiore, 2008; Gough, 2013). Occultism also thrived in late imperial Russia, there have been even popular occult journals and cheap instruction manuals for seances (Mannherz, 2012). In her book *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (1997), historian Berenice Glatzer Rosenthal states the following.

“Occultism in late Imperial Russia (1890-1917) was not simply a passing fad; it had a profound and enduring impact on Russian and Soviet thought and culture... The occult ideas that circulated in the early twentieth century in Russia contributed massively to the politics of myth and cult that culminated in Stalinism.” (Glatzer Rosenthal, 1997).

Scientific mysticism was an existing part of the scientific- and pseudo-scientific terrains of Soviet Russia. As Maria Roginska (2025) put, Soviet science and ideology created a “reservoir of the mystified unknown”, which refers to a “framework for understanding the persistence and intertwining of religious and mystical elements within Soviet scientific discourse”. “This environment, characterized by doublethink and secrecy, nurtured the growth of scientific fantasies and mysterious imaginaries, allowing mystical concepts to endure under the veneer of science” (Roginska, 2025, p. 1). This fertile soil later nurtured countless esoteric and conspiratorial narratives about the West as part of a grand cosmic struggle. The appetite for science-fiction bordering on pseudo-science literature was huge, catered to by outlets such as the Фантастика (Fantastika) magazine issued by the publisher Молодая гвардия (Molodaya Gvardiya) steadily from the 1960s until 1990.

The post-1991 esoteric boom in Russian media and publishing meant, that the ideological vacuum was filled with occult and spiritual content, namely coverage on UFOs, healing seances, theosophy, and astrology, which gained mainstream legitimacy. Newspapers, such as НЛО (NLO, which is the Russian abbreviation of UFO) or Аномалия (Anomaly) were sold, and state TV began broadcasting psychic healers and mystics in the late ‘80s and ‘90s (Belyaev, 2006). Esoteric thinkers, however, did not retreat to private belief, they became politically engaged, and as there was a demand for such interpretations of the chaotic world, their presence became normalized. They combined mysticism with “metaphysical politics”, utopian predictions, divination and channelling (Ordabai, 2018; Ozhiganova and Tessmann, 2023). Under Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin institutionalized political post-modernism and occult-infused propaganda. Vladislav Surkov oversaw the state media’s adoption of psychic shows, sorcery, and conspiracy-loaded content, offered as a form of entertainment and ideological tools (Mäkinen, 2011; Ordabai, 2018). Skilled political technologists carried this heritage further and systematically crafted meta-narratives blaming the “hand of the foreigner” behind anything undesirable for the

Kremlin: protests, pandemics, or geopolitical shifts. This method deliberately merged truth and falsehood in a post-modern style, and depicted the West (especially the CIA, NGOs and American banks) as puppet masters (François and Schmitt, 2015).

Occult metaphors are still common and casually dropped in by various talking heads in Russian media. For instance, when Western powers are depicted as engaging in occult warfare, using mystical or technological manipulation to undermine Russia, such as electromagnetic weapons or mind control. Deep-state narratives, suggesting that the West has hidden governance structures (NGOs, intelligence agencies, secret societies), within Russia. Russia's depicting as the Third Rome, which defends Orthodoxy and spiritual authenticity from Western decay can also be classified as an embodiment of occult metaphors. One of the most recent developments in this field is a mixture of cyber and occult ideas, which is digital disinformation or propaganda that blends conspiracy talk with esoteric imagery, such as tarot, astrology, ancient prophecies applied to geopolitics. This has seen an immense surge after the invasion of 2022, when Russians exhibited a stronger interest in political shows and news in general. Esoteric shows are still extremely popular, probably, as a way of refuge for those who seek to strip away from politics and political news. A prevalent example is *Битва экстрасенсов* ('Bytva extrasensov' or Battle of Psychics), where people with alleged paranormal abilities compete with each other. Launched in 2007, the show, which airs on Gazprom Media's TNT channel, is now in its 24th season and demonstrates high viewership rates.

However, there is a fusion of popular TV-programs, with psychics, and entertaining content and a dose of politics. These programs might even be to the liking of those less engaged with political content in general. As Ekaterina Maksimova (2023) noted, invited "experts" in political talk shows happened to be more frequently psychics, fortune-tellers and astrologers. Other talk shows, with less pronounced political profile such as the *Malakhov* are regularly devoted to supernatural topics such as "Chechen Visionary," "Military Psychics on the Frontline," "X-Men Among Us," where invited guests are tarologists, numerologists and psychics. These guests make predictions on Russia's future and the outcome of the war. Other programs, such as "New Russian Sensations" of the Gazprom Group's NTV also combines supernatural and political content. Maksimova describes a new phenomenon too, the rise of "Z-oracles", or "war psychics" (военные экстрасенсы) such as "military-psychic" Lieutenant General Alexei Savin, who

reportedly worked in Soviet intelligence, and who stated in an episode of Malakhov that Vladimir Putin holds a higher status than any other leader in the world. Fortune teller Tamara Globa in the same show promised that Russia would ultimately rise and prevail after the challenging years. In another episode, Aizen, a hereditary soothsayer, whose arrival according to the show was predicted by Nostradamus himself, claimed the following.

“Unexpected troubles will arise from unforeseen sources, and to avoid this, we must unite against the satanic forces of evil. We, the Russian people, representing a diverse multinational community, are destined to be humanity's saviours. Let us come together under the guidance of our leaders and channel our pure intentions and spiritual impulses to combat imperialist evils.” (Maksimova, 2023)

2.5.5 Tokenism in political talk shows

The inclusion of Western experts in political talk shows, especially those whose views would run counter to the dominant narrative, exemplifies the token expert phenomenon. It has its roots in “tokenism”, described in sociological literature (Laws, 1975; Kanter, 1977). This concept defines the inclusion of a numerically small proportion of members from an out-group, in order to create the illusion of diversity, fairness, or inclusion. What makes it an illusion is that their out-group’s actual influence is severely limited, and their presence serves primarily the reinforcement of the existing power structures or narratives. As Robert Entman’s work on framing shows, the very act of featuring a “token”, can serve to define the boundaries of acceptable debate, and to implicitly suggest that although alternative views are present, they are weak or illegitimate (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As Petr Gulenko (2021) describes, Russian political talk shows turn public discussion into aggressive propaganda display, where informational selectiveness meets an illusion of equal representation of guests with opposing views (Gulenko, 2021).

In Russian political talk shows Western experts can serve as tokens in several ways. Their mere presence might provide an illusion of “balance” or “open debate”, with the underlying assumption that all viewpoints are considered, even if the known-for-being-structured environment ensures the overwhelming dominance of the anti-Western perspectives. Token experts accepting invitations to these shows are frequently outnumbered, outmanoeuvred by other participants or presenters, or sometimes even

subjected to aggressive mockery. Their arguments are often presented as straw men, easily dismantled by the host or other guests, and the fact that usually they are the only not mother tongue Russian speaker in the show while others simultaneously shout at them in Russian, also does not help them much to advance their views and present them in a convincing way. As an example for this, in 2024, I analysed an episode of *Time Will Tell*, where American journalist and frequent talk show guest Michael Bohm was featured. The journalist, who in 2017, on the same show was even physically attacked by the presenter for “offending Russia”, is a regular guest to these shows, even though in the circumstances provided by the show, he clearly cannot advance his arguments “in the defence of America”. He is routinely humiliated and disrespected, and at the end, he agrees with the host’s points. His treatment as a punching bag allows Russian domestic audience to feel triumphant over him and his country (Takácsy, 2024b). Western experts or politicians, who consistently support the Kremlin’s narratives can also function as tokens even without them knowing it. Their “Western” identity is highlighted to legitimize Russian positions and to use them as external validators. Russian domestic anti-Western propaganda gauges on anti-NATO or anti-EU phrases of NATO-and EU-countries’ leaders or other politicians. The case of leading politicians of Hungary’s Orbán government was a prime example for this, as their Western-critical phrases were used as an external validation to domestic audiences that the key domestic narratives were legitimate and well-founded (Takácsy, 2024a).

2.5.6 Performance and performativity in political talk shows

Political talk shows are performative spaces, where hosts and their invited guests engage in a dramaturgical display which is designed to inform, entertain or persuade. Western experts appearing in Russian political talk shows, hence, are not simply interviewees, since they “perform” roles that are directed by the show’s producers and hosts. Erving Goffman’s ground laying work in “the presentation of self in everyday life” describes how individuals constantly “perform” social roles to manage impressions, and he argues that this concept is extended to the professional display within media (Goffman, 1959). Performativity refers to how language and actions do not solely describe but also create or constitute what they describe (Butler, 2002). As Nick Couldry argues, media practices are not only about transmitting information, but also about actively “doing” things, enacting social realities and meanings (Couldry, 2004, pp. 119–132). This implies that

the mediated environment of a talk show does not simply reflect reality but actively shapes it. Talk shows at their core are designed as theatrical productions. They feature a carefully conducted set, lighting, sometimes even a live audience in the studio and distinct roles for hosts, guests and other commentators. The deliberate staging highlights the fact that these are controlled environments, and not spontaneous dialogues. Hosts usually act as ringmasters, they guide the conversations, manage guest interactions and ensure that the flow adheres to the pre-determined segments, and commercial breaks. What seems to be spontaneity, often masks a script of conversations, roles and expected dramatic arcs. This is no different in Russian political talk shows, where all of the above-mentioned elements are carefully scripted and curated (Pomerantsev, 2015).

The inherent performativity becomes even more heightened in political talk shows as opposed to lifestyle talk shows, due to the political stakes. These programmes are not only discussing current events, but they become battlegrounds for public opinions, arenas where political actors or commentators clash, seek legitimacy for themselves and their views, delegitimize opponents and solidify ideological positions. Hosts are often complex performers, who probe interviewers, passionately advocate for a particular view, aggressive interrogators or even outright provocateurs. Their performance dictates the emotional tone of the show and often steers the narrative towards a very specific conclusion. On Russian state-controlled TV channels, hosts are particularly skilled at directing the show with leading questions, strategic interruptions and emotional cues which are designed to evoke the desired emotions and responses from guests (Pomerantsev, 2015). W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman (1985) wrote extensively about political storytelling. According to their description of talk shows are a tool for that. Guests, whether they are politicians, academic experts, or commentators perform their assigned or chosen roles. A politician might perform the role of a decisive leader or a wronged victim. An expert may perform the role of an impartial, emotionally not involved analyst or an impassioned advocate. The rhetoric of participants is frequently designed for maximum impact, and the show uses a rich audiovisual toolkit to engage the audiences' attention along with emotional appeals and memorable phrases that resonate with the audience rather than to take part in a nuanced discussion. This turns political arguments into a spectacle, where winning the performance matters just as much as the logical coherence of the argument (Bennett and Edelman, 1985).

A core element of political talk show performativity is the dramatization of the conflict. Heated emotions and aggression are crucial elements of these talk shows (Gulenko 2025). Debates often evolve into shouting competitions, rhetorical jousting and pre-decided victories, shown as powerful performances of ideological confrontation. The fiery nature of these interactions generates interest amongst the viewers and keeps them engaged, often at the expense of substantive policy discussion. This transformation of politics into entertainment is a key characteristic of the mediatized political discourse (Thompson, 1995, pp. 240–244). The emotional labour and effort put in by guests (should it be anger, frustration or confidence) serves to create an affective atmosphere designed to sway the viewer's sentiments. The studio audience plays a performative role as well. Studio audiences often react on a cue with applause, boos or laughter, and these reactions amplify the dramatic effects. For the viewers at home, the performative nature of these shows encourages a shift from critical analysis to emotional engagement and the consumption of political "drama".

In Russian political talk shows, the discussed performative nature is manifested in the hosts aggressive directing too, who typically do not behave as bare moderators, but play a crucial role in inciting and directing aggression. They often verbally overpower guests, especially those holding dissenting views, they interrupt them, make dismissive remarks and use a combative tone to control the narrative (Pomerantsev, 2015). Foreign experts are particularly prone to be assigned performative roles. The ones whose views align with the Kremlin's narrative are treated as "insightful realists" and "truth-tellers", and their presence lends an internal validation to the state's anti-Western messaging. Conversely, experts who would challenge the official line are often set up to perform as "out-of-touch liberals", or "naïve idealists", subjected to public humiliation, and strategic misrepresentation of their arguments. Their "Westernness" becomes part of the performance, a feature used for the demonstration of the perceived intellectual or moral superiority of the Russian position. Emotional mobilization is also an integral part of these shows' performativity. Evoking strong emotions from the audience, such as anger at perceived Western hypocrisy, fear of Western aggression, disdain for Western values is a key feature of the shows. The staged arguments and emotional outbursts are designed to create a sense of urgency and moral righteousness.

The aggressive tone of these shows is also understood as performativity. Yelling, personal attacks and dramatic condemnations are commonplace, and engaging to the audience, which serves to simplify complex political issues into a good versus evil narrative, channelling public frustrations and solidifying an “us vs. them” mentality (Oates, 2016). As Petr Gulenko (2026) found, aggression is strategically used in Russian political talk shows, with slightly changing target. Before 2012, aggression served the purpose of entertainment, in an environment of political disengagement. Then it was turned into an indirect propaganda tool in the period between 2012 and 2014, channelling aggression towards internal non-systemic opposition figures, as the Kremlin sought to minimize the impact of Bolotnaya square protests. From 2014 to 2022 aggression became a direct propaganda tool, targeting a built up ‘enemy’, with caricatured Ukrainian experts and the ‘collective West’. Surprisingly, he found that the aggression levels observed after the start of the full-scale invasion against Ukraine slightly declined, and the main aim of propaganda became fostering apathy (Gulenko, 2026).

2.5.7 Language usage

Even though Russian political talk shows are known for their offensive tone and sometimes vulgar expressions, certain explicit swearing and profanity is strictly banned in the Russian media. The regulation of vulgarity on Russian television and more broadly in public discourse started in 2013 as part of the state’s growing control-seeking over the information and cultural space. Amendments to Federal Law N 436-F about protecting children from information that could harm their health and development in 2010 banned the dissemination of material containing obscene language and vulgar expressions. In 2013, amendments of Article 4 of the Russian Federal Law on mass media of the Russian Federation Code of Administrative Offences introduced for the “promotion of traditional values” stipulated hefty fines to the outlets for “the use of foul language”, while the list of forbidden words and expressions was not disclosed. Journalists, therefore, were left confused and motivated to exert self-censorship. The ban made immediately more difficult to report about for instance, about the Femen demonstrators’ actions (topless activists who wrote vulgar messages on their body to demonstrate at Vladimir Putin’s visit in Germany) (Elder, 2013). Amendments to Federal Law N 101-F3 about the state language of the Russian Federation in 2014 banned verbal obscenity in theaters, films and other pieces of art, also books containing such words have to be marked with warnings

on their covers. The 2014 amendment explicitly banned the use of profanity (known in Russian as “мат” or *ненормативная лексика* – “non-normative lexicon”).

Manuela Kovalev (2021) notes that fight against vulgarity was one of the symbolic battlefields of the Putin era’s first years. Vladimir Sorokin’s grotesque science fiction novel Голубое сало (Blue Land) has become the first to be subjected to an obscenity trial in 2002. Besides vulgar words, the book also contained political hints, and the pro-Kremlin youth organization *Идущие Вместе* started to campaign against “harmful influences” and called the society to swap Sorokin’s work to a piece by Boris Vasilev, a Soviet author known for his patriotic war novels. This topic was handy for Putin who claimed to “bring back normality” to Russia and “making order” (Kovalev, 2021). These legislative steps, referring to the necessary protection of public morality and children from perceived harm, were part of a broader moral turn, where the state imposed conservative values through legal means. By the “cleansing” of public language, the state aims to create the image of order and traditional values, meanwhile subtly limits spontaneous or unscripted expressions which might deviate from the official narratives. There is a special emphasis on punishing the word “мат” (given its deep cultural roots, as of swearing at someone’s mother). This expression is frequently used in colloquial language.

While swearing is — and already was during the 2010s — judged more harshly than in the West in general in public language use and polite company, Vladimir Putin himself is famous for using “mafia slang” and “jail lingo”. As Leon Aron (2022) noted, his speeches drew from the vocabulary of хамство (*khamstvo*, to be translated as degrading and boorish expressions), already in 1999. His word choices seem to be spontaneous but are highly intentional. Aron remembers that

“in the 2019 Address to the Federal Assembly, the annual state-of-Russia oration, Putin called America’s European allies by the name the Soviets used for the Axis powers in World War II: “satellites.” They just “oink along” (podkhryukivayut) to America. Two years later, these same “satellites” “yapped along” as they ran after the United States.”

He notes that Russian diplomats otherwise known for their professionalism and pedantic adherence to protocol were quick to catch up to this kind of rhetoric.

““Hey, you, yes you, look here, don’t look away!” the Russian deputy envoy to the United Nations, Vladimir Safronkov, called out to his British counterpart,

using the familiar (and in this context very rude) ty instead of the polite vy. “Don’t you dare offend Russia anymore!” “We shit on Western sanctions,” Russia’s ambassador to Sweden, Viktor Tatarintsev, said” he quoted (Aron, 2022, paras 11 and 13).

Vladimir Putin’s use of vulgar yet witty expressions and comebacks contribute to the populist image that he is of his people, that he is a tough man who knows the hard reality of the streets and belongs to criminal circles. The macho character he builds can be described to certain extent by the phrase *вор в законе* (vor v zakone, literally translated as 'thief in [a position of] the law') (Hamant, 2022).

Despite the legal ban on overt vulgarity on Russian television, the political talk shows are notorious for their aggressive, emotionally charged and vulgar rhetoric. This contradiction is resolved through a combination of strict technical compliance, rhetorical strategies that skirt the boundaries of the law and the performative nature of these programmes. Since the May 2014 law came into effect, explicitly banning profanity in public performances and media broadcast, Russian TV channels are legally obliged to censor “mat”. In practice, any word containing this part (and there are plentiful such words) is beeped out or muted. This often happens, particularly during heated debates or exchanges. This paradoxically draws attention to the profanity and creates a sense of raw, unfiltered, uncensored emotions, while the content technically is censored. However, vulgarity in these political talk shows extends beyond explicit profanity.

Hosts and guests frequently engage in a language use which could be termed “near-mat” language, or sheer rhetorical aggression. This involves the systematic and conscious use of highly insulting, disrespectful, pejorative and emotionally charged language, which while does not contain legally banned words, aims to dehumanize, belittle or demonize opponents. There are countless examples of this, for instance routinely calling opponents, especially from the West, or Ukraine) “Nazis”, “fascists”, “drug addicts”, or “degenerates”, and employing other forms of emotionally manipulative language, moralistic condemnations and appeals to grievance or victimhood (Binder and Kaltseis, 2023). The permanent use of sarcastic, derisive and contemptuous tones is also a distinctive feature of these shows (Robinson, 2018).

While “*mam*” and other profanities are demonstratively censored, there are numerous colloquial slang terms which are often used in Russian political talk shows. The sheer richness of Russian language in derogatory terms for other nations and countries, former members of the USSR and enemies during the Cold War alike, suggests that the “Great Russian Chauvinism” (*великорусский шовинизм*) has left a significant imprint in Russian culture. These terms are not merely insults but linguistic tools that reflect, reinforce and actively construct an imperial and hierarchical worldview. This worldview places Russia and within that ethnic Russians at the apex, at the expense of its neighbours, the broader West and even of other proclaimed “brotherly” nations within the USSR and the Soviet bloc. A non-comprehensive list of often used pejorative slang terms for other nationalities and countries in current colloquial Russian and Russian political talk shows is as follows is in the Annex (Annex II).

Great Russian chauvinism refers to an aggressive, often imperialistic form of Russian nationalism, that deems the cultural, historical and ethnic superiority of the Russian people and their civilization over other nationalities, particularly within the borders of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. As opposed to benign patriotism it actively seeks to dominate and diminish others. The term itself was used by early communists such as Vladimir Lenin or Grigory Zinoviev to distance them and their vision on the future communist state from the tsarism they despised. Imperial Russia from the 18th century applied the concept of an expansive, multi-ethnic empire ruled by a dominant Russian core which fostered chauvinism. Ethnic Russians were viewed the protectors and civilizers of diverse peoples, and Russification policies were pursued across the empire. The Tsarist governments actively pursued the assimilation of non-Russian populations, suppressed local languages, cultures and religious practices, implicitly (and often explicitly) asserting Russian cultural dominance (Weeks, 2004; Pavlenko, 2011). Especially toward other Slavic nations, the narrative of Russians being their “elder brother” emerged, implying a paternalistic right to guide and control their “younger” Slavic kin (Shirayev and Zubok, 2015).

Communist revolutionaries and politicians heavily criticised Great Russian chauvinism. Stanislav Smagin (2013) in his study on national guilts quotes Grigory Zinoviev’s speech from 1923.

“We have Great-Russian chauvinism with the most dangerous meaning, which has 300 years of monarchy and imperialist policy behind it, that is, the whole foreign policy of tsarism, about which Engels wrote in 1890 that ‘anyone who in this respect makes even the slightest concession to chauvinism, will inevitably give a hand to tsarism’” Двенадцатый съезд РКП(б). 17–25 апреля 1923 года. Стенографический отчет. М., 1968. pp. 602-603. (Smagin, 2013).

However, while Zinoviev warned against it, and the USSR officially condemning “Great Power Chauvinism”, the Soviet Union carried many chauvinistic features and reinforced them in practice. The slogan of the “friendship of peoples” often masked a *de facto* hierarchy where Russian language became the language of inter-ethnic communication, and Russian culture was presented as the most advanced one, which unifies the colourful Soviet Union (Yakovenko, 2019). Russian national pride, especially after WWII was actively cultivated and Russian sacrifice and leadership in the Great Patriotic War has become a narrative which reinforced Russian historical destiny and uniqueness. On the contrary, non-Russian nationalisms were ruthlessly suppressed by purges and deportations and often branded as “bourgeois nationalism”, separatism, or deviationism. The concept of a unified “Soviet people” often served to dilute distinct national identities, implicitly promoting a Russified super-ethnicity (Wojnowski, 2015).

The collapse of the USSR was followed by an immediate sense of national humiliation, loss of empire and perceived Western condescension. This void was filled by nationalism often tinged with chauvinism. The search for a new post-Soviet identity has led many to embrace a more assertive Russian nationalism. The concept of “near abroad”, and the doctrine of protecting Russian compatriots abroad implicitly asserted Russia’s privileges in these territories, disregarding their sovereignty (Kozin, 2015; Vashakmadze, 2017). This fuelled a re-emergence of chauvinistic attitudes towards these newly independent states (Herd, 2000).

The pervasive use of derogatory terms in current Russian political talk shows reinforces this chauvinism. Terms like *хохол* (Ukrainians) or *чурка* (Caucasians or Central Asians) dehumanize these people, and strip individuals and nationalities of their dignity reducing them to mere caricatures. Dehumanizing them makes the justification of aggression against them easier and dismisses their national aspirations (for instance the

commonplace, vehement denial of the sovereign Ukrainian state in these shows), or their unique cultural identities. The use of these names positions them as inherently inferior or primitive undeserving respect or self-determination. Slur words like *грузинчик* (Georgians) *армяшка* (Armenians), *молдаванчик* (Moldovans), or *казахчонок* (Kazakhs), always using condescending diminutives, imply these nations' perpetual subordinated status to Russia. The term *застарбайтер* (of Central Asians or Moldovans) reinforces their perceived role as cheap, low-status labour force around Russia's orbit, which is a reminiscent of colonial relationship and denies their agency or full human rights. The existence of these slurs for former Soviet peoples on national television taps into imperial nostalgia. Their casual and commonplace use implies a continuous Russian right to dictate the terms of communal living to these "younger brothers", or former colonial subjects. When these slurs are combined with aggressive rhetoric, they justify Russian interference, annexation or military aggression and picture them as a necessary measure to put these subordinate states back in their rightful place within Russia's sphere of influence.

The use of these terms also serves as a tool for the ideological othering and demonization of nations. Words like *бандеровец* (Ukrainians), *фашист* (Baltics), *недостраны / псевдогосударства* (Baltics), and *НАТОшники* (NATO countries) ideologically delegitimize the national identities, historical narratives and their political choices. They reduce complex national movements to "fascism" or "foreign puppets" framing their pursuit of sovereignty and Western integration as something externally imposed on them, and an existential threat to Russia as a response to which aggressive countermeasures are justified. The West-demonizing slurs, such as *пиндос* (Americans), *Англосакс* (British/Americans), *Гейрона* (Europe), and *Сатана* (USA) portray Western nations as inherently degenerate, hypocritical, conspiratorial and morally corrupt. "*Гейрона*", for instance, this deeply pejorative word combines "gay" and "Europe", suggesting that Europe has lost its traditional masculinity, and became weak and unmanly. This demonization asserts a perceived Russian moral superiority and justifies Russia's confrontative stance presenting its actions as a defence against a decadent and hostile "other" and simplifies complex geopolitical rivalry into a clear moral battle. The use of slur words is not reserved only for foreign nations, internal dissenters receive them too, suggesting that they are controlled from the outside as no legitimate criticism may arise without external support. Terms such as *западники* (Westernizers), *либерасты*

(derogatory for liberals merging the words 'liberal' and 'pederasta'), and *пятая колонна* (fifth column, for internal dissenters) link domestic critics and the supporters of Western values to the otherwise demonized external "other". This linking is a powerful tool for social control, labels internal dissent as traitorous and foreign-backed, and consolidates the monolithic national ideology.

The constant and uncritical use of these derogatory terms in political talk shows is not accidental and plays a role in normalizing Great Russian chauvinistic sentiments and attitudes among the viewers. By presenting respected hosts and high-profile guests while using these slur words regularly, they become accepted and common in public discourse and normalize this kind of derogatory language. The delivery of these words, often in moments of drama or outrage, is designed to evoke strong emotional responses in the audience, cementing these negative stereotypes and those chauvinistic attitudes which they embody in the public consciousness.

2.5.8 Personal experience of Western experts in Russian political talk shows

It is rare to find testimonies or Western experts who appeared in Russian political talk shows. However, sporadic the commentaries of the few former participants available, are rather informative with regard to their selection process and also with how the production of these shows go. Joshua Yaffa, a former Moscow correspondent from the United States remembered how he was invited to one of them.

"In September, 2014, six months after the annexation of Crimea, a new program appeared on Channel One called "Time Will Tell," a crass debate show covering the issues of the day, which usually revolve around how the West is keeping Russia down. When, in August, 2016, a producer called me to ask if I would appear as a guest—it's hard to find Russian-speaking Americans in Moscow willing to get yelled at for an hour on live television—I agreed, curious about what it feels like on the factory floor of the state's propaganda enterprise." (Yaffa, 2019, para. 48)

His words highlight that to find an American who is there in place, able to be physically present is crucial, as showcasing a guest on a screen alone would deduct from the overall entertaining value. Similarly, the given Western expert characters' ability to speak

Russian fluently is vital. While in a simple evening news programme dubbing a Western commentator who speaks another language might work impeccably, political talk shows, representing the genre “agitainment” aim at entertaining while agitating need to be engaging for the viewers (Tolz and Teper, 2018). He knows well, retrospectively, that the talk show is not the place to convey meaningful discussion, but he goes there to “be yelled at for an hour”.

“The audience numbered about a hundred people, who were given the signal to clap when the show returned from commercial break, or when one of the pro-Kremlin guests made a particularly acerbic point at the expense of one of the show’s villains—in this case, me. We discussed the Russian Olympic athletes facing bans for doping allegations and the conflict in Syria, where both Moscow and Washington had forces deployed. All of the questions were leading ones. The United States carries itself with an air of impunity, one of the show’s hosts told me—“Isn’t that disastrous?” Another posited, “Obama referred to Russia as a ‘regional power.’ Can’t we say that’s when all our problems between the two countries began?”(Yaffa, 2019, para. 49)

Yaffa’s experience fits in the patterns described by the literature on the performative nature of talk shows and political talk shows. The in-house audience being instructed to clap at given points, especially when the show’s American villain is giving emotional cues also for the audience at home, as a form of external validation following a given phrase, and creates the illusion for the TV-viewers that what they heard is the opinion of the majority.

“I returned to “Time Will Tell” every now and then over the next few months, on each occasion certain that this would be the day I would manage to say something subversive and devastatingly convincing on Russian state television. Of course, that never happened: not only was I outnumbered by half a dozen other guests, but I could interject only a few words at most, and had to huff and puff and raise my voice. In the end, I came across as just another agitated talking head. Even my most forceful protests made issues of fact seem muddy and unknowable, proving that everything is a question of perspective and allegiance. The program offers viewers a crude carnival sideshow: one of its co-hosts is famous for having once

brought out a bucket labelled “Shit” and daring a Ukrainian guest to eat from it. (It turned out to be chocolate.)”(Yaffa, 2019, para. 50)

These words reinforce the previous observations that the circumstances are inherently and extremely disadvantageous for a Western expert. He was not only heavily outnumbered by the representatives of another opinion or opinions, but he was most likely strategically cut off as Peter Pomerantsev pinpointed (Pomerantsev, 2015), hence, he could not argue for his view as he had planned. Being cornered he had to resort to shorter ways of expressing himself and raise his voice, which most likely, immediately made him look like a laughable character who has no good arguments and can only compete with the volume of his voice. He, on the level of perception has become just another talking head like the others also there to shout and entertain. The whole setup served to promote the narrative of post-truth, that there are no facts just opinions and narratives, and no truth but a chaotic world which cannot be known and understood, just how the Kremlin is eager to promote both at home and beyond Russia’s borders (Pomerantsev, 2015; Szostek, 2017b; Roloff and Dunay, 2018).

The reason why they refrain from providing critical reflection on their experience there, might come from their continued involvement in another Russian Kremlin-close outlet. Another reason might be their overall scepticism towards mainstream Western news outlets, or they keep their political views and regarding their former appearances useful and professional. Critiquing the format as a former insider probably posits as a prerequisite the affiliation with a Western outlet after partaking in the shows, and the lack of business ties to Russia and / or the lack of close family members residing in Russia who might be at risk or as a source of leverage. Why a Western expert might shy away from talking about their appearance in these talk shows seems to be in other cases, that they were assigned another identity in the Russian talk show from their original one. Carl Schreck for instance, described the case of a Soviet émigré Gregory Vinnikov, who ran a travel agency in Manhattan before allegedly stiffing clients and fleeing the country in 2012. He resurfaced in 2017 on state-owned Rossiya-1’s political talk show hosted by Vladimir Solovyov, fiercely defending Trump and explaining why America is right, under a brand-new identity. His title said “Greg Vainer, journalist, United States of America” (Schreck, 2017).

Fake “Western journalists”, condemning their home country and assuring Russian outlets and their audiences about their and their peoples’ sympathy have been uncovered by many outlets, for instance, by Arte (2022). They showed three cases of this kind. Thomas Röper, claimed to be a German journalist working for Der Spiegel while in reality, he has been living in Russia for a decade, never worked as a journalist and only has a blog full of conspiracy theories. John Mark Dougan was positioned as an American journalist, but he also lived in Russia with political asylum and has never been a journalist. Haukur Hauksson, “Icelandic journalist” also lived in Russia for over a decade in the time of Arte’s coverage and had been photographed regularly at the Kremlin’s events with leading politicians. His only known professional activities are related to Russian domestic propaganda outlets (‘Von Beruf Putin-Fan: Russlands “West-Journalisten”’, 2022).

2.5.9 Women in Russian political talk shows

The representation of women in Russian political talk shows is contradictory. While they are not entirely absent, even based on a superficial observation, it is visible that they are significantly underrepresented compared to their male counterparts among invited experts and tend to appear almost exclusively in the role of host or technical staff — for instance, holding the microphone to the interviewee —, but they are all-over heavily outnumbered. While women appear in many segments of Russian media, as hosts, cultural commentators, lifestyle-related contents and in other less confrontational types of programmes, they are rarely present in political talk shows, especially as guests.

The reasons for that might be manifold. On the one hand, political talk shows represent a highly confrontational format. They are known for their aggressive, performative and often loud rhetorical style (Pomerantsev, 2015; Binder and Kaltseis, 2023). Debates frequently evolve into shouting competitions, with personal insults and heated denunciations. On the one hand, this kind of “macho” environment might be inherently less appealing or conducive to women experts or potential guests themselves. On the other hand, producers and hosts, often men might also implicitly or explicitly believe that this confrontational style suits best for male participants, or that female guests would be less effectively conveying their messages or feel comfortable in such an arena. Gendered expectations of how men and women “should” behave in public debate could play a role both in who is invited and who accepts the invitation (Finneman and Jenkins, 2018).

Besides the gendered expectations, the Russian political realm's "conservative" or "moral turn" should also be taken into consideration. The Putin era has brought about a strong emphasis on "traditional values" in many aspects of public life, which reinforces conservative gender roles, while the entire Russian national identity has become more masculine (Brankova, 2023). This conservative ideology tends to value and promote women's roles in the family and as guardians of morality, while aggressive political discourse is considered a masculine domain. Although women hold significant positions in various spheres in Russian political and public life, they are often times used as tokens, and their presence largely serves the illusion of equality and inclusion (Nechemias, 2000; Nistotskaya and Stensöta, 2018). It would be incorrect to assume that this conservative turn was strictly a top-down process, without immense proneness to accepting it from the society. Marlene Laruelle (2023) argued that a situational conservatism in the 1990s preceded the state's "conservative turn", however, Russia was not an outlier in this in the region, as conservative attitudes are shared by almost all post-socialist countries. Also, Russian society is not unanimously conservative but polarized into conservative and non-conservative constituencies (Laruelle, 2023). Alexandra Novitskaya, Valerie Sperling, Lisa McIntosh Sundtrom and Janet Elise Johnson (2024) analysed this Russian conservative turn and compared Vladimir Putin's speeches to domestic audiences with the changes in public opinion. They found that the conservative turn in political rhetorics went hand-in-hand with a shift in the popular opinion, showing a conservative trend in the public opinion regarding women's rights too (Novitskaya *et al.*, 2024).

For a better understanding of women's underrepresentation in political talk shows, it is worth looking at the broader picture and see what their typical representation is in other kinds of Russian talk shows. A prevalent example for that is *Мужское/женское* ('Male/female') which is a flagship prime time talk show of Channel-1, with an unbroken success since its 2014 launch. The show's entire concept is built around the image of representing both the presumed male and female points of view in resolving usually a family problem or juicy private life drama. This proclaimed "balance" is demonstrated for instance, by the presence of a male and a female host, but the dynamics within the show clearly demonstrate that there is no equality between them either. Yuliya Baranovskaya showcases attitudes and is treated by his male counterpart as a junior, immature, overly emotional and sometimes irrational *girl* (despite being a middle-aged

woman, a mother of several children with decades of experience in being on TV). As opposed to her character, Alexandr Gordon is positioned as an older, rational and logical man, free from emotional upheavals, whose wisdom and life experience is unquestionable and who typically has the last word in the debates. Sexism and patriarchal instincts are not only promoted by the hosts and their interaction but by the show as a whole, as the analysis of Anna Sedysheva (2020) found. She argues that the show propagates the sexism of gender stereotypes that marriage has to be the main goal of women in life and frequently suggests that the victims of domestic violence or sexual violence are at least as much to be blamed as the perpetrator (Sedysheva, 2020).

Alina Kamalova (2024) came to highly similar findings after conducting a critical discourse analysis of the narratives surrounding gender-based violence in a Russian talk show, *Пусть говорят* ('Let them talk'). The show itself runs with great success as well since 2005, while its predecessors under the names of *Большая стирка* ('Great washing') and *Пять вечеров* ('Five evenings') were on air from 2001 and 2004 respectively. Kamalova found that the show propagates a family ideology which supports victim-blaming, normalises and depoliticises domestic violence. It suggests that the victim is at fault and the state has no responsibility either in preventing or reducing domestic violence (Kamalova, 2024). It is important to notice that in 2017, with the strong support of the Russian Orthodox Church, Russia decriminalised domestic violence, unless it causes "substantial bodily harm", or "happens more than once a year", which has led to a significant decrease in reporting and an increase in police reluctance to investigate such cases (Chamusco, 2017; Roache, 2018).

As women in talk shows and other programmes appear in traditional female roles or in traditionally female domains such as family or typically feminine topics. Politics is not one of them, while in some cultural contexts, including Russian society, male voices might still be implicitly perceived as one that holds more inherent authority or gravitas, particularly in "hard" political and security topics. There is an apparent paradox between the visible underrepresentation of women in Russian political talk shows, and the fact that some of the most watched ones are co-hosted by some, such co-host of '60 Minut' Olga Skabeyeva or the editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan a regular guest. Apart from the fact that Olga Skabeyeva co-hosts the mentioned talk show with her husband Evgeny Popov, hence in a way fitting in conservative worldview, her media persona is even more

masculine than many of her male counterparts. As the independent TV Rain (2023) described her character, she's a

“ruthless warrior in Putin's propaganda army who not only doesn't fall short of the standards set by her male colleagues, but at times far surpasses them. Skabeeva can win a shouting match with almost anyone. She and her husband Evgeny Popov are in charge of one of the most difficult genres of propaganda: pretend political; debate shows” (Olga Skabeeva —The Professional West-Hater, 2023).

Margarita Simonyan represents a highly similar public persona, an aggressive warmonger, who can shout loud, has a merciless image and who constantly blames and despises the West (Rothrock, 2024). Simonyan's hatred towards the West is one of her persona's key characteristics, although she studied in the US as a scholarship holder, hence she is a US hater with strong educational background from there (Latypova, 2017). Apparently, while in lifestyle-related talk shows, dealing with “soft” topics, women's feminine features are highlighted to represent the conservative traditional values (such as in the case of Yuliya Baranovskaya from Мужское/женское), in “hard”, confrontational topics like the ones featured in political talk shows, women must represent characteristics typically associated with masculinity, which in this case is harshness, loudness, combativeness and aggression.

To have a female host in otherwise male-dominated domains can also serve other goals, and tokenism can be observed here as well. As Anna Temkina and Elena Zdravomyslova (2014) in their study suggested, hosting is a distinct role that women can fill without upsetting the broader gender hierarchy (Temkina and Zdravomyslova, 2014). A female host, even a prominent one, does not necessarily challenge the overall male dominance in political expertise or decision-making. The role of a host is often to present and manage the discussion, while (usually male) experts provide the substance and reinforce the desired narratives. This allows for a certain female visibility without fundamentally changing the gendered dynamics of the political discourse.

2.5.10 Airing time of political talk shows

The placement of political talk shows (especially of 60 Minutes, in prime time from 18:00) suggests that they are considered of paramount importance for the regime. Commercial channels in market-oriented democracies seek to maximize advertising revenue and audience share. Scheduling decisions, therefore, are data-driven and consumer-focused (Mestler, 2025). Some Western media channels, predominantly public broadcasters such as BBC, ARD, and ZDF are not profit-oriented, but given that they operate in an environment shared with profit-oriented challengers, their behaviour is affected by the profit-oriented actors' decisions too. This is a remarkable difference compared to Russia. In authoritarian countries in general, the primary profit of state-owned and state-controlled channels is not profit-maximization but political control, legitimization of the ruling regime and the effective dissemination of official ideology and propaganda. This is why shows that directly or indirectly promote the state's ideology, values and policies are prioritized. Meanwhile, audience retention as a secondary goal is present also here, hence, entertaining programming is included, containing ideological content, and this is where programmes belonging to the "agitainment" genre come into play (Tolz and Teper, 2018). The significance of political talk shows was also underpinned by the sharp change observed in March 2022, when 60 Minutes, previously aired for 60 minutes per weekday, turned into a 2 times 2 hour-long programme.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Reflexivity and ethics

This research is inevitably shaped by my own position as a researcher of a Western academic institution, studying Russian political communication and propaganda. Furthermore, at the time of my defence, I work for the European External Action Service, focusing on Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). I am aware that I do not approach the subject from a complete analytical distance.

My background, education, former work experience and embeddedness in the think-tank field and academic community are all Western-centred. Being born and raised in Hungary gives me a set of assumptions and sensitivities that shape how Russia is discussed in Central Europe too. Nevertheless, I believe that I possess a considerable knowledge about Russia, and have more compassion than to be regarded as a mere Western 'Russia-hater', a colloquial term used by the Russian state propaganda to characterize foreign journalists, experts and other groups who voice criticism towards Russia to delegitimize their criticism.⁴ Having lived in Moscow for years, travelled around the country, being fluent in Russian and constantly following the Russian information space allow me to navigate at ease and understand this space at depth.

The mentioned set of assumptions include the risk of approaching the topic with a predetermined conclusion, for instance, that participation in Russian state-controlled media necessarily indicates endorsement of the Kremlin's political agenda, or alternatively, that Western experts' appearances should simply be understood as an ordinary act of public commentary. In this research, I tried to avoid both of them. My understanding of how political commentary in TV programmes works was shaped by my own experience, having appeared in various programmes as an analyst in Hungary and Europe regularly in the recent years. However, I am conscious of the fact that I gained the mentioned experience in a different media environment, and have no experience in working in a centralized, centrally coordinated one of an authoritarian country. Although the Hungarian media environment of the Orbán-era demonstrated numerous similarities to the Russian in terms of its centralized nature and media control, my own experience pertains exclusively to independent outlets, as I was invited to talk only by them. I am a mere observer in Russia's case, acknowledging that my own experience is transposable only to a limited extent.

As the research was based entirely on publicly available media material and open-source information such as biographies, and public media appearances, a formal ethics review

⁴See for example: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023, October 17). *Politico Plants yet Another Anti-Russia Story*. https://mid.ru/en/press_service/articles_and_rebuttals/rebuttals/nedostovernie-publikacii/1909652/ Accessed: 16 August 2026

under the applicable institutional procedures of the Corvinus University of Budapest was not required. I still considered ethical aspects throughout the research, among others, in decisions about how to characterise individuals, and how to contextualise their statements. Also, while the research presents a brief description of the identified Western experts appearing in the examined political talk shows, it does so only in the depths deemed necessary to understand the phenomenon better, and for instance, does not include financial information, even in those cases where such material would be available.

I understand that my own interpretation is situated, hence, reflexivity cannot eliminate the possibility of bias. Therefore, the purpose of this reflexivity is not to claim neutrality, but to give a broader context to the interpretation of my research. My position as a researcher belonging to the Western academic world, and as an employee of an EU institution clearly impact how I interpreted the studied material. Instead of trying to conceal this position behind an ideal of complete objectivity, I have sought to make it a part of the methodological awareness that underpins this research.

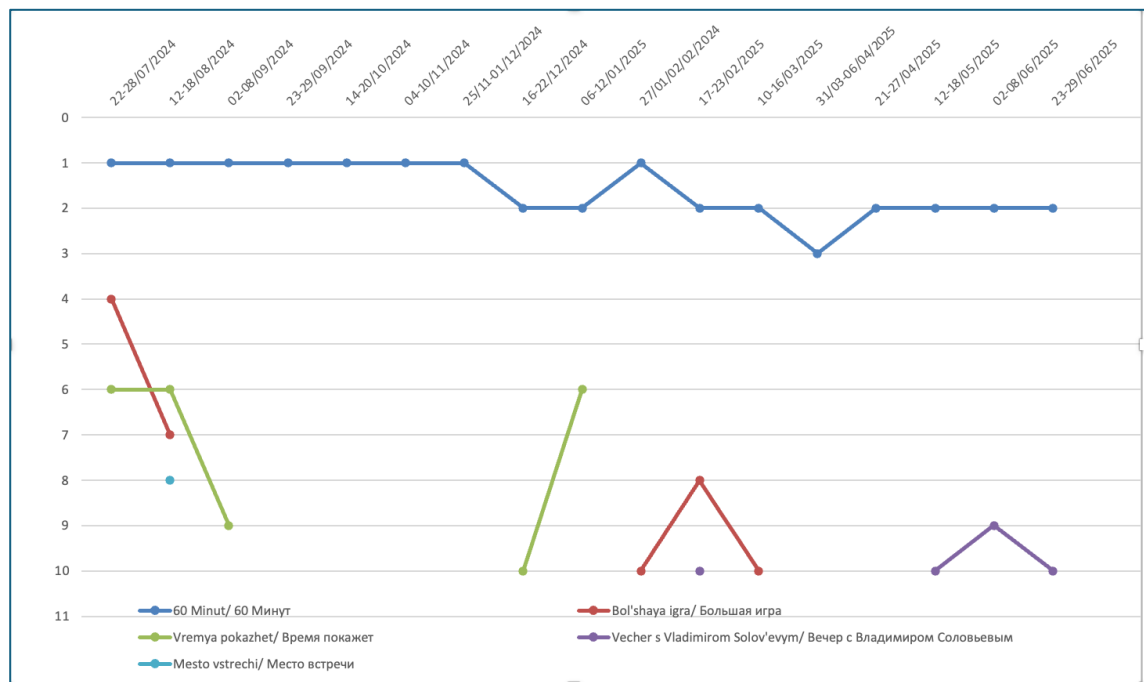
3.2 Finding three of the most watched political talk shows hosting foreign expert guests

In the Russian Federation, Mediascope is the only company which is permitted to audit media and disclose the results. When finding three of the most watched political talk shows, a considerable difficulty was, that Mediascope removes older data from their site after a while. Data older than June 2024 were not available on their site, but to show samples of a year, I took the data for every third week between July 2024 and July 2025. I filtered Mediascope's viewership data to show the ratings for the genre "social-political programmes" for adult audiences across Russia for every third week for a year. Their ratings show the overall most watched ten programmes for the given week, so altogether it does not show for instance, whether the weekly viewership of a daily aired programme was, but the overall most watched episodes. In the following table, all the programmes are visible which appeared amongst the 10 most watched ones in the sampled weeks in the given period, highlighted with grey those of them, which are aired daily and are political talk shows.

Title	Political talk show	Aired on week days	01-07/07/2024	22-28/07/2024	12-18/08/2024	02-08/09/2024	23-29/09/2024	14-20/10/2024	04-10/11/2024	25/11-01/12/2024	16-22/12/2024	06-12/01/2025	27/01-02/02/2024	17-23/02/2025	10-16/03/2025	31/03-06/04/2025	21-27/04/2025	12-18/05/2025	02-08/06/2025	23-29/06/2025
Nashi. Voenkory	No	No	10		10				9					5	6	6	5	7	5	6
Voskresny vecher s Vladimirom Solovevym	Yes	No	6	5	3	7	8	9	#	7		4	7	7	9	9		6	8	5
Bolshaya igra	Yes	Yes	7	4	7							10	8	10						
Voennaya tayna	No	No	5	3	5	10	10	10				5	9	9						8
Vremya pokazhet	Yes	Yes		6	6	9				10	6									
Mestnoe vremya. Subbota	No	No	9	8																
Vecher s Vladimirom Solovevym	Yes	Yes	8										10				10	9	10	
Chelovek i zakon	No	No			4	3	4	6	4	4	8	3	6	6	7	5	8	8		7
Nash potrebn nadzor	No	No			9											8	10			9
Novye russkie sensatsii	No	No				6	6	4	2	5	4		4		5	2	3	4	3	
Chelovek v prave s Andreem Kynitsynym	No	No				8	9	8	7	10	9		8			10	9	9	10	
Besogon TV	No	No					7	7		9							7		7	
Vystuplenie V.V. Putina na Mezhdunarodnoy plenarnoy sessii diskussionnogo kluba "Valdai"	No	No							8											
Press-konferenciya V.V.Putina po itogam vizita v Kazakhstan	No	No								8										
Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinyim	No	No								1	1									
Rozhdestvenskoe intervyyu Svyateyshego Patriarkha Kirilla	No	No										7								
Antifeyk	No	Yes										9								
Pryamaya translyatsiya rozhdestvenskogo bogoslužheniya iz hrama Khrista Spasitelya	No	No										10								
Press-konferentsiya po itogam rossiysko-belorusskih peregovorov	No	No													7					
Mesto vstrechi	Yes	Yes			8															
Zdravstvuyte, tovarishi!	No	No		10																
Golosa ushedshih duh	No	No		9																
Morpehi. Spetsial'nyy reportazh	No	No		7																

Table 2. Viewership of the most watched "social-political programmes", from all age groups across Russia sampled every third week (01/07/2024-29/06/2025) source: <https://mediascope.net>

Given that Mediascope's available data only cover one part of the examined period of observed three and a half years starting from the start of the full-scale invasion, based on these it cannot be determined exactly, which ones were the three most watched political talk shows in the entire period. It can be safely stated though, that the highlighted ones belong to the most watched political talk shows.



3. Figure. Viewership data of the most watched political talk shows from July 2024, sampled every third week for a year. Source: mediascope.net

Out of the five identified political talk shows, three with live audience was chosen: *60 Минут* (60 Minutes), *Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым* (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov) and *Время покажет* (Time Will Tell) were chosen. *Большая игра* (The Great Game) was eliminated for multiple reasons. On the one hand, as it does not feature live audience, and although according to its official description it is a talk show, it is considerably less vulgar and aims less at inciting emotions than the infamous ones. It was launched to target a more educated audience with the Kremlin's messaging (Tverdov 2019). On the other hand, the presenters themselves play a different role, and strive less for inciting emotions and channelling aggression as their function was described by Petr Gulenko (Gulenko, 2026). *Место встречи* (Meeting point) was eliminated as it appeared amongst the most-watched 10 programmes of their genre once in the sampled periods.

3.3 Description of the three chosen talk shows

3.3.1 Evening with Vladimir Solovyov (Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым)

This programme, led by the emblematic presenter Vladimir Solovyov (sanctioned by the European Union) is a socio-political talk show. It was first launched on the channel NTV in 2005. One year earlier, all actual political analytical programmes were terminated on

the channel (namely «Намедни», «Свобода слова», «Красная стрела» и «Личный вклад»), and the General Director Vladimir Kulistikov announced the new programme with the following words: *"Solovyov has a different format, more entertaining, oriented more towards artistry and originality than analytical profundity"* (Kommersant, 2005). Its airtime was an hour and consisted of several blocks not only on political but also various social issues, show business or sport. Each block hosted a different group of 1-3 guests including politicians, commentators, experts, artists and sportsmen. The format started off as a TV magazin but was relatively quickly transformed into a traditional talk show. The show's special Sunday edition (Sunday evening with Vladimir Solovyov, «Воскресный вечер» с Владимиром Соловьёвым), targeted a somewhat more serious audience with more serious topics, which was reflected even by the more formal dress code of the guests and the in-show audience. The Sunday edition was closed in 2008, as it *"fulfilled the task it had in the year of elections"*, summarized Solovyov, while the programme itself was not considered political campaigning (Lenta.ru, 2008). Solovyov himself worked as a presenter in many shows meanwhile, including the talk show «Поединок» on Rossiya-1.

Both the original show and its Sunday special edition returned in 2012 on this national television channel, Rossiya-1 (Россия-1), with an extensive reach, at later regular time slot (from 23:30), with longer episodes. In the shows they kept the format of discussing 2-4 topics with different invited guests. The Euromaidan and the subsequent happenings in Ukraine brought about another change, the show was moved to an earlier slot taking over those where serials had been aired, starting from 21:00 (Moskovskiy Komsomolets, 2014). The tone of the show rapidly became harsher, and aired numerous special editions, besides keeping the Sunday special as well, since 2018 with another spinoff programme, "Moscow. Kremlin. Putin" («Москва. Кремль. Путин») which focuses on the activities of the Russian President in the last week.

The presenter Vladimir Solovyov unquestionably became the most known Russian talk show host, often referred to as a "star presenter" within the Russian media landscape. He is recognised by the Kremlin, and his efforts in "shaping the image of Russia" have officially been acknowledged with state awards such as the Order "For Merit to the Fatherland", 4th class, in 2022. His expressed political stance is aligning with the official Kremlin narrative, His presenting style is aggressive and less polite than some other

presenters', overtly promotes conservative narratives and actively intervenes in discussions to steer the conversation to the predetermined direction (Robinson, 2018). His role extends way beyond moderation, he himself frequently delivers concluding statements which influence the audiences' overall assessment of the debated topics. He frequently makes inflammatory statements, such as advocating for missile attacks on Berlin, Paris, London and Brussels (Ortega, 2024). His role is far from neutral, but an active ideological architect within his programme. His aggressive style, interventions and concluding remarks serve and are designed to reinforce the official Kremlin line and suppress any genuine critical inquiry. This also contributes to the discussion to become a performative spectacle, where the host's role is to ensure that the predetermined narrative prevails, hence, rather indoctrinating the audience than fostering any open debate.

As Roberto Rabbia (2025) described, the show's format typically involves discussions featuring "mnemonic actors" categorized as "liberals" and "statists", creating a polarized, often antagonistic debate. This setup is intended to give the impression of a democratic discussion, but in practice, it turns into a confrontational spectacle. Recurring themes in the period of 2014-2018 were memory politics of the 1990, which were often framed through a "liberal" and a "statist" portrayal. "Statist" participants consistently portrayed the Yeltsin era and its economic reforms in a negative light, referring to them as the period of "deception and robbery", to the liberal elites of that time as "criminal destroyers" or "traitors". This narrative explicitly aims to justify the Putin regime's authoritarianism by presenting it as a necessary corrective to these perceived failures and betrayals. The show and Solovyov himself promotes a strong anti-Western rhetoric, frequently mocking Western countries, especially the US as a "domineering but declining power" (Rabbia, 2025).

The programme utilizes both visual and verbal information to underscore official statements, and to evoke strong emotional responses from viewers. The setup of the studio is fairly traditional, the invited guests are standing in a circle, with the presenter in the middle, each new topic is introduced with a coverage from the news, with narration. Sometimes, guests briefly tune in online for a short time, but the emphasis is on the guests and their debate with Solovyov and each other. Currently, the show's length can be up to three hours, and after the commercial breaks, a new set of guests is presented.

The show targets a broad Russian TV audience, leveraging the extensive reach of Rossiya-1. It gained particular popularity among older demographics (especially those aged 60 and above), although anecdotal evidence suggests a general avoidance among younger audiences, who already tend to watch the television significantly less than older demographic groups (Levada Center, 2024). Despite this generational divide, the talk show is ranked as the second most popular social-political talk show in Russia after 60 Minutes, reportedly reaching approximately 10% of the Russian population, which translates to about 15 million viewers (Mediascope, 2024).

3.3.2 Time Will Tell (*Время покажет*)

Time Will Tell was premiered on the state's Channel One (*Первый канал*) in 2014 September. It is considered to be a prime-time political talk show of the channel, and its launch coincided with a broader trend of pro-Kremlin TV channels of the time of introducing new political talk shows or increasing their airtime following the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 (Robinson, 2018). The show significantly increased its airtime in 2022, as part of the direct, strategic communication response to this major geopolitical shift, demonstrating its adaptability to heightened information warfare.

The program involves several presenters, each of them sanctioned by the European Union. They are namely Anatoly Kuzichev, Artyom Sheynin and Yekaterina Strizhenova. Kuzichev is notable for his aggressive promotion of anti-Western rhetoric on air, despite his personal preference for Western travel destinations: before 2022, he frequently visited Paris, other European cities and the United States (Ezhov, 2025). He has been observed to massively disseminate fabricated stories, such as a claim about French President Macron using cocaine (*Putin's media puppets*, 2022). Sheynin and Strizhenova also represent an aggressive and harsh leadership style, often intervene or shout down on invited guests. The aggressive and often confrontational demeanour of the hosts is deliberate and serves to steer the discussion to the pre-planned way, while also repeating and amplifying the strategic claims and statements needed to deliver the propaganda messages.

The hosts' overall presentation style is aggressive, sometimes they do not even refrain from the use of physical violence. An infamous example for this was when Sheynin

grabbed the above-mentioned, frequent guest to these shows, American journalist Michael Bohm by the neck, shouting and further threatening him (Detector Media, 2017). As Roberto Rabbia (2025) wrote, this performative aggression serves multiple propaganda functions: it creates a compelling blend of agitation and entertainment, captures audience attention through spectacle, and forcefully reinforces the "us vs. them" narrative. By actively dominating discussions, interrupting opposing viewpoints, and allowing debates to devolve into shouting matches, the hosts effectively suppress genuine critical thinking and ensure that the Kremlin's message is delivered with maximum impact and minimal challenge, transforming political discourse into a controlled theatrical performance designed to secure public compliance (Rabbia, 2025).

The programme focuses on current news and events, which means that it almost exclusively thematizes foreign policy topics, with a “near complete disregard for domestic matters”, except for elections and major natural disasters (Robinson, 2018). Consistent recurring themes include the portrayal of the United States as a “domineering but declining power”, Ukraine as a failed state, the European Union sweeping into a moral decline and misguided hostility towards Russia. Accusing the collective West with Russophobia is a common feature of the show, along with the praising of the Russian President. The overwhelming and perpetual focus on external threats and international relations serves as a deliberate strategic diversion. presenting Russia as a besieged fortress facing a hostile and declining West redirects the domestic audiences’ attention away from internal social and economic problems, or governance issues. Also, it fosters a siege mentality among the population, consolidates support around the leadership, implicitly discourages domestic criticism and justifies the government’s actions.

The show’s setup contains six or more guests on the two sides of the stage, and the hosts in the middle. It also incorporates live messages from social media users displaying them on screen during the broadcasts. Kseniya Boletskaya (2017) uncovered, that the programme used bots to pose as authentic audience members on social media, generating artificial positive comments about the hosts, and criticize the guests. Using bots, they fabricated a sense of public engagement and support for the programme and its content (Boletskaya, 2017). In contrast to more established political talk shows, Time Will Tell appears to specifically target politically less savvy audiences.

3.3.3 60 Minutes (*60 минут*)

60 Minutes was premiered on the channel Russia-1 (Россия-1) in 2016, originally with an hour of airtime, as its title suggests. This was quadrupled in March 2022, shortly after the full-scale invasion, as the show runs for two hours before noon, and has another two-hour block in the prime-time slot, early evening.

Each episode of the show covers current world politics, and sometimes domestic themes, however, there is a heavy accent on the former one. Among the 5-8 invited guests, there are politicians, humourists, journalists, and experts. Sometimes one of the anchors is reporting live from an external location, since 2022, often from territories occupied by Russia, while the others are present in the studio. Also, guests sometimes are present online. To reinforce the *bon mots* and key statements, the citations from the guests or hosts are time to time put on screen in the background.

The programme is co-hosted by Olga Skabeyeva and Evgeny Popov, a married couple, both sanctioned by the European Union. Both are highly visible figures in the Russian state media, known for their vocal criticism or any opposition to Vladimir Putin. Popov holds a dual role as a State Duma deputy and has been subjected to international sanctions for his active support for Russia's aggression in Ukraine. He has publicly asserted that Ukraine and its allies pose an active threat to Russia, accused the "fascist" regime in Ukraine of committing a genocide against Russian-speakers, but he himself was spreading fabricated stories about "Ukrainian Nazism" already in 2013 (*Yevgeny Popov, Russian propagandist, TV presenter, 2022*).

Skabeyeva is considered a key mouthpiece for the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus, who actively disseminates anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western messages. She routinely praises Russia's deeds in Ukraine and proclaimed that the "special operation" had concluded, and World War III, involving NATO has commenced (*Olga Skabeyeva, propagandist, TV presenter, 2022*). As Olga Kultysheva (2021) assessed in her study, Skabeyeva's oratorical style could be described with an accusatory intonation, aggressive personal assessments, provocative questioning, and a highly selective use of facts to corroborate her allegations. She employs "strict methods of restraining the opponent with verbal attacks and accusations", frequently interrupting and dictating the flow of the discussion (Kultysheva, 2021). The dual roles and direct political engagement of Popov exemplify a

deliberate fusion of political power and media influence within the Russian state apparatus. The arrangement signifies that 60 Minutes is part of the Kremlin's political machinery, where hosts can be active political actors who utilize their reach to directly implement governmental ideological directives. This integration reinforces the top-down control of information, ensures a total alignment with the Kremlin's agenda.

Segments within the show typically commence with the hosts introducing the topic, which is followed by commentary from invited guests, often interrupted by the hosts' remarks and questions. Ridiculing the decaying West is a prevalent topic in the show, questioning Western leaders' mental fitness, and portraying actions of the Western administrations as inherently beneficial for Russia are often observed (*What Does Russian State Media Really Say About Trump and Americans?*, 2025). The show systematically constructs and reinforces the image of external enemies, such as the United States, the NATO or the "fascist Ukraine".

This active constructing of enemy pictures serves to unify domestic audiences against this perceived threat, and this way to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy. Alas, the hyperbolic focus on foreign policy nearly entirely avoiding domestic issues serves to divert the population's attention from domestic problems and to foster a strong sense of nationality and that of a "besieged fortress" (Yablokov, 2018). The programme frequently shows video sequences. A key technique employed is emotional manipulation, whereas hosts and guests may appear on the verge of tears, and other emotional references are made to soldiers' stories. This serves to engage viewers and increase their support for the war, along with dramatizing narratives which aim at invoking strong emotional responses from the audience.

3.4 Finding the Western experts in these talk shows

In narrowing down the research to concrete nationalities constituting the West for Russian propaganda and the public eye, the following decisions were taken. There are no questions about whether the members of the European Union fall in the group of Western countries in the eyes of Russian audiences. This group was broadened with the members of the European Economic Area, the United States of America and Canada. The search, hence consisted of these nationalities, and in addition an expert title. For example, search queries

included: ‘*Austrian journalist*’, ‘*Austrian expert*’, ‘*Austrian political advisor*’ (in both Russian forms), ‘*Austrian analyst*’, ‘*Austrian political scientist*’, ‘*Austrian professor*’ and ‘*Austrian lecturer*’. Turkey as a nation is not part of the West for the Russian public eye but being a member of NATO, in certain ways it is (Etkind, 2013). For instance, in anti-NATO propaganda, the quotes criticizing NATO from former military personnel to the Turkish army are sometimes cited.⁵ Hence, for finding such Turkish experts featured, three more titles were added to the query: former advisor to NATO (бывший советник НАТО), former employee of NATO (бывший сотрудник НАТО), and former colonel to the Turkish army (бывший полковник турецкой армии). Israeli experts should be incorporated as well, for the same reason as Turkish ones. Although Israel is not considered to be part of ‘the West’ for Russians, Israeli experts potentially discrediting NATO are viewed as people with an insider knowledge on this institution, hence, the attributed credibility of Western experts criticizing Western institutions is present. Besides NATO it is the European Union which is the most criticized Western institution (and known for most of Russians too). However, based on preliminary research, expert characters citing for anti-EU messages are usually branded with their nationality, not with their EU-affiliation (no relevant results for instance for “former advisor of an MEP”). Thus, the research covers only expert characters branded with their nationality, leaving aside expert characters associated with Western institutions (such as the ICC, the United Nations, etc.) and those that formerly fulfilled diplomatic roles (e.g., Ambassadors). The exception here is NATO, as the search extends to former employees or advisors to NATO. Australia was deliberately excluded from the scope of this research, due to both conceptual and methodological reasons. While it is an important member of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, a supporter of Ukraine, and is politically aligned with the Western bloc, this research seeks to capture how the notion of the West constructed in Russian domestic propaganda primarily in relation to the Euro-Atlantic political and security space, the geographical location of Australia falls far away from.

For the full search query, see Annex I.

In the searching process the following challenges had to be overcome. First, although the three talk shows have public archives and it is possible to access them on several

⁵ As an example here even the title says ‘Former colonel to the Turkish army disclosed that NATO and the USA actively help Israel’ (Бывший полковник турецкой армии рассказал, что НАТО и США активно помогают Израилю, 2025)).

platforms (for instance, on the shows' own websites, on smotrim.ru and rutube.ru), it is not possible to search for the speakers' names directly, as they are not tagged, and not mentioned in the header of the episodes. Second, in Russian media it is very frequent to quote Western experts who talk to Western outlets or post on social media, but not necessarily to Russian outlets. For instance, the simple search for a term such as '*American journalist*' in Russian, shows tens of pages of results discussing Tucker Carson's own shows, and these results are out of the scope of this research. Third, foreign names are sometimes transcribed to Cyrillic in several forms, as Russian outlets do not always assume correctly how a given name is pronounced and transcribe it in an incorrect form. Therefore, in all cases when the suspicion arose (in the case of double letters, and names containing an 'e' which sometimes is transcribed by outlets as 'э', other times by 'е'), all the possible transcribed versions were checked. Fourth, in the online archive of War of Words, it is possible to search for tagged speakers, but the archive powered by AI does not always identify and tag the experts talking (and marks them with numbers in the transcript of the episode such as 'speaker_01'). Hence, to look through the long list of tagged speakers in this archive, flagging the foreign names could disregard potential speakers if they were not identified by name by the algorithm.

Considering these challenges, the mentioned 291 combinations of search terms were run three times, adding '*Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым*', '*60 Минут*' and '*Время покажет*' in Yandex, the most used Russian search engine. The first three pages of results were screened, and a preliminary list of expert figures was created. This list of names found was cross-checked then with the War of Words archive according to tagged speakers, and in the normal search bar as well, this way even those experts which were not identified by the algorithm, but were addressed by name in the show, then responded (as 'speaker_01') were incorporated. It is also possible to filter by programme, and period in the War of Words archive, hence, the list of finds by the given experts' name (or mentioning, then responding) was narrowed there to the period of 24 February 2022 to 24 August 2025, and to the coverage of the three talk shows.

3.5 The examined events

In selecting the events to examine the strategic narratives of the Kremlin and the

narratives used by the Western experts featured in the three chosen political talk shows, the following justified criteria were considered. First, the event had to be relevant to the ongoing full-scale war against Ukraine. Second, it had to mark a major milestone in terms of escalation, following the underlying assumption that new, “newsworthy” happenings are certainly covered in these programmes. Third, as Western experts are typically featured for narrating news related to their own countries’, or the Western block’s institutions, major political events in two key Western countries (elections in the United States and Germany), and NATO summits during the observed period were chosen. Among the fourteen selected events, there are eight which were pre-planned, the dates published and known for the wider public well in advance. These are two elections, four NATO summits, and two high-level meetings. In these cases, the underlying assumption is that in political talk shows, not only the events’ aftermaths are discussed but *a priori* the expectations, as they start to prepare the audiences to what is going to happen, provide them with a framing in advance, shaping what they should think about the given event well before it is due. For this reason, for these events, 5 working days of content before, the coverages of the very day (if there was an episode on that day), and 5 working days after the event are going to be analysed. The other six events were unexpected to the public therefore, it is assumed that no concrete, preliminary preparation of the audiences took place, but the communicating of the given situation, and what we see is how it is handled afterwards using the communication toolkit. These unexpected events generally caused a widespread outrage in the West, which either induced a direct policy response (i.e. increasing the support of Ukraine) and/or rhetorical one, which could be discussed in these talk shows, or was a reason in itself to be discussed (such as Trump moving nuclear submarines closer to Russia’s territory, following Dmitry Medvedev’s usual menaces). Hence, for these unexpected events the coverage of the day of the event, and 5 following working days is analysed.

Date	Event	Foreseen by the public	Examined weekday material
24.02.2022	Start of the invasion		24.02.2022-03.03.2022
02.04.2022	Bucha massacre uncovered		04-08.04.2022

08.04.2022	Russian attack on the Kramatorsk railway station		08-15.04.2022
29-30.06.2022	NATO Summit in Madrid	x	22.06-07.07.2022
06.06.2023	Breach of the Kakhovka dam		06-12.2023
11-12.07. 2023	NATO Summit in Vilnius	x	04-19.07.2023
9-11.07. 2024	NATO Summit in Washington, D.C.	x	02-18.07.2024
05.11.2024	American Presidential election	x	29.10-11.11.2024
23.02.2025	German parliamentary election	x	17-28.02.2025
03.03.2025	US halt on all aid to Ukraine		03-10.03.2025
24-25.07.2025	NATO Summit in The Hague	x	17.07-01.08.2025
01.08.2025	Trump moving nuclear submarines after Dmitry Medvedev's 'provocative statements'		01-08.08.2025
15.08.2025	Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska	x	08-22.08.2025
18.08.2025	Trump's meeting with Zelensky and European leaders	x	11-24.08.2025

Table 3. The chosen events from the first three and half years of the full-scale invasion, and the periods observed.

There were certain events, where the observed periods slightly overlapped. Also, as the researched period ends on 24.08.2025, the observed period for the last event, the meeting between President Trump and European leaders, also ends on that day, cutting one day off from the “5 workdays after the event itself rule”.

In the end, the coverage of 114 days of these three political talk shows was observed to further filter them to those when the earlier identified Western experts were featured. Unexpectedly, in *60 Minutes*, not a single Western expert has appeared on the examined

days. The other two shows regularly featured them, the “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov” featured them in 29% of the given days, and Time Will Tell in 69%, sometimes even in several sub-units of the show of extreme, and variable length. The filtering of the talk show episodes for the formerly identified Western expert was done by the War of Words website,⁶ which is a large, continuously updated online archive of Russian media (online, Telegram channels, TV programmes) based on Microsoft Azure Cloud services. It is also able to generate Russian and English transcripts to talk show episodes, consequently, this was used for the creation of English language transcripts to the relevant episodes. As for the language of the transcripts, English was chosen even though Russian would have been more desirable, since for the further coding I had access to the NVivo software, which, based on my own earlier experimenting does not deliver reliable results coding sources written with Cyrillic letters. To validate the accuracy of the English transcripts, a certified, Russian mother tongue translator was tasked, who validated the transcript of a 10 pages-long purposive sample, which comprised of various kinds of segments, speakers and communication situations, therefore its results can be extrapolated to the textual body regarding the abilities of War of Words. The translator certified that the English translation is sufficiently accurate and suitable for the stated research purposes. See the certification and the detailed validation sheet in Annex III. The textual corpus of the identified talk show episodes is 3910 pages (2 343 641 words). The textual corpus filtered for these Western experts is smaller, 324 pages (140 836 words).

3.6 Reconstructing the Kremlin’s official narratives about the chosen set of events

To reconstruct the official narratives related to the chosen set of events, the same time periods were used as for the experts featured in talk shows, given that the goal was to reconstruct the actual narrative-alignment, not necessarily the narrative reframing of events from the past. Nevertheless, the narrative reframing of the past is a constant feature of the Putin-regime used to gain regime legitimacy (McGlynn, 2020). With the closeness in time of application of the examined and reconstructed official narratives, it is important to showcase the timely alignment of the narratives applied by the experts and the official ones, and the impact of the latter to the former. In short, to showcase how the Kremlin’s official narratives around certain events and their changes can best be compared to the

⁶War of Words, <https://theworldwar-dev.azurewebsites.net/>

narratives used by the Western experts featured in the talk shows if they are timewise as close to each other as possible.

The textual corpus based on which the official narratives are going to be reconstructed is gained from the talk show performances of key Kremlin figures. The reason why talk shows (and the exact same three talk shows as in the previous parts: Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Time Will Tell and 60 Minutes) were chosen, is that the target audience of these talk shows is the same as in the case of Western experts, hence, the comparison will be more suitable as opposed to other kinds of communications which the actors convey for instance to foreign audiences on X, formerly Twitter.

The chosen Kremlin figures are Maria Zakharova (Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), Dmitry Peskov (Press Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation), Vladimir Putin (President of the Russian Federation) and Margarita Simonyan, (Editor-in Chief of RT, the Kremlin's key propaganda tool abroad). They were chosen as mediums of communication of the Kremlin's official stance to the external world including both foreign and Russian domestic audiences is part of their key responsibilities. What messages they communicate and how is not their personal choice or opinion but the official stance of the Kremlin. The observation of the talk show coverages replicated the exact same days as well as in the case of Western experts, hence, the same 114, centred around the same set of chosen events. Similarly to the coverage of the Western experts, the textual corpus was acquired using the War of Words website. The English textual corpus is 3635 pages (2 561 554 words). The textual corpus filtered for these four people is significantly smaller, 163 pages (88 014 words). Such as in the case of the Western experts' textual corpus, English as its language was chosen for the further coding and analysis in NVivo, which as mentioned above, does not handle Cyrillic letters reliably.

3.7 Limitations to the methodology

There were constraints both regarding time, and the available software and financial means. This entails for instance, that not all the episodes of the three chosen political talk shows could be handled and analysed in the observed three and a half years, but the

amount of data had to be filtered to make it manageable manually or with the available software help of NVivo.

With this methodology, as the observed period did not represent continuity but consisted of fragmented, shorter periods, it is not suitable to detect slight changes in the narratives. Also, the fact that due to NVivo, the language of the transcripts had to be English instead of Russian means that certain nuances were lost when doing the narrative analyses, and due to the extensive amount of data, it was not feasible to listen to each talk show episode in Russian to verify the texts (which would have been several hundred, making it easily to over a thousand hours). For the in-depth analysis of the performance of the Western experts however, the author worked from the original audiovisual material.

Another limitation is that the online archive used for transcribing, War of Words occasionally does not recognise the speaker and leaves it the name as unidentified (such as speaker_01). This means that although for the citations (over 130) and the analysis itself the author manually checked whether each identified Western expert was identified correctly in the transcript by War of Words, this is the lowest threshold of the appearances of these Western experts. In the textual corpus of 2 561 554 words there might be further appearances of them, not identified by the software, hidden and labelled such as “speaker_01”. While acknowledging this, the number of identified and manually controlled appearances constitutes a dataset which is large enough to draw valid and representative conclusions.

The methodology is also unable to capture or reconstruct the personal motives, emotions or grievances of Western experts appearing in Russian political talk shows that might bring them to criticize the West. These aspects along with their possible financial remuneration are beyond the scope of this research.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Results for research question 1

The first research question sounded as follows: who are the Western experts in Russian political talk shows? The query for Western experts who were featured on the examined 114 days in the three chosen Russian political talk shows resulted in 11 identified Western experts, who took part in the three selected political talk shows in the first 3 years and 6 months following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. During the query, a few conclusions were drawn regarding the featured Western experts. On the one hand, knowing the Russian language very well is an exclusive criterion to be featured in political talk shows. While there are many foreign expert figures featured in Russian media, even if they live in the country for a long time, apart from rare cases, they do not learn Russian properly (if at all). Therefore, they are mostly featured in written form, or in English, such as US navy veteran Mark Sleboda, the Italian journalist Vincenzo Lorusso, or former French politician Fabrice Sorlin. Such characters are often featured even in Vladimir Solovyov's programmes, although, not in the talk shows, but on the less watched, 'Solovyov LIVE' online channel. On the other hand, as an interesting phenomenon, experts of Russian/Soviet origin can also be presented as Western experts. Both Alexandr Sosnovsky and Vladimir Sergienko are presented as "journalists from Germany" and "political scientists from Germany", while they are mother tongue Russians, born in Ukraine, currently living in Moscow. Since they are presented as such, they are going to be incorporated in this research as Western expert characters. The interesting part in this is, that they were not given a Western 'pseudonym' as the already mentioned Grigory Vinnikov who is featured as 'Greg Vainer', but have kept their Russian-sounding names and still being treated as Western insiders.

In addition to these observations, while the pool of Western experts available for political talk shows - preferably residing in Moscow and fluent in Russian - seems to be extremely small compared to all the featured foreign expert voices in the Russian media, several of these characters who earlier on appeared in political talk shows, were not featured since February 2022, even if their pro-Russia stance does not seem to have changed, are still active in Russian media, and they still use pro-Kremlin narratives, and comment on topics which at first sight would perfectly fit in the topics of the political talk shows. For instance, such is the case of the "Hungarian political consultant" Miklós Keveházy, who is still actively featured by News Front and other Russian outlets, mostly criticizing

Ukraine, and the West but has not been in political talk shows since 2018. Similarly, the German analyst Alexandr Rahr, who is still active in Russian media, and has been a frequent guest in the observed talk shows before 2022, did not appear in them in the observed period. The reasons for their absence are unknown and fall beyond a scope of this research, but it is to be noted.

4.1.1 The identified foreign expert figures

The short professional biographies of the foreign expert figures show a colourful picture:

Michael Bohm (born in 1965, St. Louis) is an American-born journalist. As James Marson (2016) wrote, he is a graduate of the School of International Affairs at Columbia University. Between 2007 and 2014 he served as an opinion page editor and op-ed columnist at the independent Moscow Times, also, he taught a journalism course in 2015 at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) (Marson, 2016). He is a frequent guest of Russian political talk shows for at least 12 years, and his activities according to critical, Western assessments serve to ridicule the US, to which he is used as a punching bag (Edwards, 2016; Marson, 2016; ‘Von Beruf Putin-Fan: Russlands “West-Journalisten”’, 2022, sc. 6:51). He resides in Russia since 1997, and established family ties there.

John Varoli (born in circa 1968, Emerson, New Jersey) is an American PR practitioner, who also graduated at a prestigious university. He has a degree in Russian Studies from Cornell University. He moved to Russia in 1992, established a family in St. Petersburg, and worked as a journalist for Radio Free Europe (Radio Liberty), the St Petersburg Times, Bloomberg and The New York Times (Varoli, 2001). According to this Wikipedia page, he left journalism in 2011, resides outside of Russia and is predominantly active in the field of PR (‘John Varoli’, 2024). He did not stop returning to Russia since the full-scale war, as one of his visits covered by Argumenty i Fakty shows (Andreeva, 2025), also, he appeared in-person in certain episodes of Time Will Tell, such as on 23.07. and 12.08.2025.

Dmitry Konstantinovich Simes (né Simis, born in 1947, Moscow) is a Russian-American author and political pundit, who led the D.C.-based think tank Center for the

National Interest from 1994 to 2022. He immigrated to the United States in 1973 looking for intellectual and political freedom after being expelled from university at home for speaking up against the Soviet involvement in the Vietnam War (Rogin, 2019). Simes met Vladimir Putin in Moscow in 2015 and was involved in arranging Donald Trump's speech in 2016 at the Mayflower hotel where he announced more intensive cooperation with Russia (Lynch, 2018). He met numerous times the unregistered Russian agent Maria Butina and was accused of being a built-in agent of the Kremlin by historian Yuri Felshtinsky (Felshtinsky, 2018). As Steven Lee Myers and Julian E. Barnes (2024) wrote, Simes' name appeared 100 times in the Mueller report about Russian interference in the 2016 US elections. In 2022 he left the Center for the National Interest and moved back to Russia and leads "The Great Game" political talk show on Channel One Russia. As part of a wider effort to counter Russian influence operations before the US presidential election in 2024, his house in Virginia was raided by the FBI, the US Department of Justice started an investigation against him (Myers and Barnes, 2024). He is sanctioned by the European Union (*Dimitri Simes*, 2025).

Xavier Moreau (born in 1972, France) is a veteran, and a French-Russian businessman, who after finishing at the Special military school of Saint-Cyr, spent five years in the French army as a paratrooper. After leaving the army, he found his way in "business security consulting" and moved to Russia in 2000, where one of his companies provided for the security of the French embassies in Moscow and Kyiv for a while (Harper, 2023). He allegedly has ties to the Russian security services, particularly to the FSB (Izambard, 2022). He was an observer of three illegal referenda, on the annexation of Crimea, and those on the autonomy of Donbass (Sideris, 2024). He is an active contributor of the Kremlin's media empire, and according to his biography on the site *Ukraina.ru* (which is part of the *Rossiya Segodnya* group), he also holds an MA degree in international relations from the University Paris IV Sorbonne (*Ксавье Моро: кто он*, 2023). Moreau has a family in Russia, and is a Russian citizen, who left Russia, according to the rumour, in order to avoid the mobilization order that had been issued to him (Izambard, 2022; Sideris, 2024). He returned and remained a regular guest in political talk shows, and an active contributor not only of Russian outlets. Since his Youtube channel was removed by Youtube for promoting hate speech, he writes for two fringe sites rich in conspiracy theories, Rumble and Odysee (Izambard, 2022). He is sanctioned by the European Union (*Xavier Moreau*, 2025).

Yakov Kedmi (né Kazakov, born in 1947, Moscow) is an Israeli politician and diplomat besides being a regular guest in Russian political talk shows, according to the database of the Free Russia Forum (2024). He was born and raised in Moscow, he immigrated to Israel in 1969. In Moscow, he studied at the Moscow Institute of Transport Engineers, and in Israel he continued his studies at the Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa and the Tel Aviv University. He served in the Israeli Defense Forces, also during the Yom Kippur War, after which he held various positions at the Israeli Foreign Ministry. As a regular guest in Russian talk shows since 2014. The Council of the European Union imposed personal sanctions on him due to his active spreading of propaganda justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine ('Kedmi', 2024). He is sanctioned by the European Union (*Kedmi Yakov Iosifovich*, 2024).

Gregor Spitzen (né Grigory Spitsyn, born in 1983, Novosibirsk), presented as an independent journalist from Germany and is featured in the talk shows online. He is a political commentator and a political editor at the Berliner Telegraph, which is a Russian language site, and has a Telegram channel called "Mecklenburger Petersburger" (*St Petersburg University brings together researchers in journalism and media communications from eight countries*, 2024; *Berliner Telegraph - Unser Team*, no date). According to the website *Жизнь звезд* (Life of stars), he was born and raised in Russia and lives currently in Rostock, Germany, and worked at the Russian Railways, but has allegedly a degree in journalism. (Sergeeva, 2021). As of his LinkedIn page he has a PhD in political science and journalism from Saint Petersburg State University (*Gregor Spitzen | LinkedIn*, no date).

Alexandr Sosnovsky (or Alexander Sosnowski, born in 1955, Kyiv) was born in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to the site Biogr (2022) after his service in the army of the USSR, he worked as a car mechanic and also pursued studies in this field. Then he worked in the construction business and later opened a naturopathic centre in Krasnodar. In the 1990s he emigrated to Germany, where he worked as a journalist and a correspondent ('Александр Сосновский – биография, личная жизнь, карьера, сейчас', 2022). He has a German language website called World Economy, due to which, he is referred to by talk show hosts as a "journalist from Germany", of the outlet World Economy. According to the website of a book he wrote, he is a professor at the

International Academy of Spiritual Unity of Peoples of the World (*Autor - Alexander Sosnowski 'Das Georgien-Syndrom'*, no date). He is a foreign member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (RAEN), which is not to be confused the renowned Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). RAEN was founded in 1990, and since has been widely criticized for the lack of scientific credibility of many of its members and for advocating for pseudoscientific theories (The Center for Media and Democracy, no date). Sosnovsky was awarded a 'doctoral degree' by this institute, and he uses this doctoral title in his media appearances ever since (*Сосновский Александр Викторович | биография и последние новости*, no date). Not much is known about his private life, or his whereabouts, but given that he is a regular guest in the observed talk shows, and was present in the studio over 220 times, presumably he resides in Russia. He is sanctioned by the European Union (*Sosnovsky (Sosnovskiy) Alexander Viktorovich*, 2024).

Vladimir Sergienko (born in 1971, Lviv), according to the outlet Natroih (2019) was also born in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and after his studies at the local Polytechnic Institute, and the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University he emigrated to Germany in the 1990s. At first, he made a living from selling German and Czech beer to his former fellow soldiers, then switched to dealing with real estate, and wrote several books (Na Troih, 2019). He has a regular online programme called *Еврозона* (Euro zone) where he comments European politics. Roman Sulima (2024) wrote for Deutsche Welle on how Sergienko was legally stripped of his German citizenship which he received fraudulently, concealing his Russian passport, stating to only have Ukrainian. German security agencies already by the time of his application expressed "serious concerns", suspecting that he was linked to Russian special services (Sulima, 2024). According to the grand-scale investigation of journalists from The Insider and Der Spiegel Maik Baumgärtner, Christo Grozev, Roman Höfner, Roman Dobrokhoto, Roman Lehberger, Ann-Katrin Müller, Fidelius Schmid und Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt (2024), Sergienko helped to file a lawsuit against the German government to stop military aid to Ukraine while he worked as an assistant to an MP of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). His work has been overseen by Ilya Vechtomov, an employee of the FSB's Fifth Service Department, and during his frequent visits to Russia, he met with his handlers from the services and received money for the AfD's appeal to the Constitutional Court. Sergienko's tasks from the FSB included slowing the delivery of German main battle

tanks to Ukraine. (Baumgärtner *et al.*, 2023). He is sanctioned by the European Union (*The Insider*, 2024; *Sergienko Vladimir Vladimirovich*, 2024).

Waldemar Herdt (born in 1962 in Zhetikara District) is a politician for the AfD born in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, and a former member of the Bundestag where he served from 2017 to 2021. While he is not called “expert” per se but a politician in the shows he was featured in, he analyzed and commented German and European politics, and as he behaves as an analyst, his appearances are being observed as those of an analyst. He has strong ties to the Kremlin, visited the Crimea after being illegally annexed, and is a fervent critic of sanctions against Russia (*Waldemar Herdt: A German Politician with Deep Ties to Kremlin - Brussels Watch*, 2024).

Jakub Korejba (born in 1985, Kelce), according to the online database of celebrities Stuki-Druki (n.d.), he is a Polish political scientist, who graduated from the Institute of International Relations at Warsaw University in 2009, and then completed his PhD at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) in 2013. He taught a special course at MGIMO about the contemporary problems of Russian - Polish relations. He was a columnist for Newsweek Polska magazine, and since the mid-2010s he is a frequent guest of Russian political TV shows, where he “protects the Western stance” while also projecting imperialistic visions, such as if Poland had the possibility, it would conquer Belarus. He is married and announced his wedding in the show *Vremya Pokazhet* in 2019 (stuki-druki.com, no date). Mainly from the early 2010s he has an impressive list of publications (*Interview with Russia expert Dr. Jakub Korejba*, 2023). He is sanctioned by Ukraine, and is titled in Ukrainian official sources as an employee of Russia Today (*Korejba Jakub*, 2024). His appearance in political shows was noted in Poland too, and Wiadomosci (2021) recalls two scandalous occasions related to his appearances. Once he was hit in the face by another guest, another time he left after an argument and did not return after the advertising break. By the article’s assessment, he is being used as a punching bag by Russian media (*Polski komentator uderzony w rosyjskiej telewizji. Emocje wywołał spór o wojnę w Donbasie*, 2021).

Jiři Just (born in 1983) is a Czech political scientist, and journalist, who resides in Moscow since 2007. He graduated from the university of Hradec Králové, and

collaborated with numerous Czech and international outlets, such as Lidové noviny, Český rozhlas, Seznam Zprávy, and CNN Prima News. He became known to the wider public as a correspondent from Russia during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but has already been active in the media for 15 years before (Loudová, 2022). About his participation in Russian political talk shows, he told the following to Petr Horky (2022):

“(...) I understand that my participation there acts as a kind of legitimization of that propaganda,” he says in his defence. At the same time, he says he believes that his critical comments, albeit within the confines of propaganda, will make some people think. “For example, during the Vrbětice affair, after which the Czech Republic accused Moscow of an attack on its territory, I tried to explain to the audience that the Czech Republic is indeed a victim of Russian aggression, not the other way around,” (Horky, 2022, para. 1).

Name (Latin)	Number of episodes in which featured	Country associated with	Title	Known work experience relevant to the title	Relevant education to his title	Residing in Russia	Russian mother tongue
Michael Bohm	263	United States of America	American journalist	Yes	Yes	Since 1997	No
John Varoli	18	United States of America	American political scientist	Yes	Yes	No	No
Dmitry Simes	5	United States of America	political scientist	Yes	Yes	Since 2022	Yes
Xavier Moreau	25	France	Independent analyst	Yes	Yes	Since 2000	No
Yakov Kedmi	185	Israel	Political scientist and former Israeli diplomat	Yes	Most likely yes	Most likely yes	Yes
Gregor Spitzen	45	Germany	independent journalist	Yes	Most likely yes	No	Yes

Alexandr Sosnovsky	227	Germany	journalist from Germany	Yes	not proven	Yes	Yes
Vladimir Sergienko	240	Germany	political scientist from Germany	Yes	not proven	Yes	Yes
Waldemar Herdt	2	Germany	politician	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Jakub Korejba	7	Poland	political scientist	Yes	Yes	Most likely yes	No
Jiří Just	75	Czechia	political scientist	Yes	Yes	Since 2007	No

Table 4. The identified Western experts in the three observed political talk shows, from 24 February 2022 to 24 August 2025

The three most numerous times featured Western expert on the examined days in the chosen talk shows was Michael Bohm with 49 episodes on 42 days, followed by Vladimir Sergienko with 27 episodes on 21 days, and Alexandr Sosnovsky with 16 episodes on 14 days. The three most featured Western experts in these shows are associated with, hence in the eye of the audience, represent the United States (Michael Bohm), and Germany (Vladimir Sergienko and Alexandr Sosnovsky). From the list of Western experts appearing in these three talk shows identified in the first part of the research, two did not appear on any of the examined 114 days: Waldemar Herdt, and Dmitry Simes.

Country associated with	Name	Episodes	Days
USA	Michael Bohm	49	42
Germany	Vladimir Sergienko	27	21
Germany	Alexandr Sosnovsky	16	14
Israel	Yakov Kedmi	11	11
Czechia	Jiří Just	10	10
USA	John Varoli	7	7
Germany	Gregor Spitzen	5	5
France	Xavier Moreau	3	3
Poland	Jakub Korejba	1	1

Table 5. The appearances of the identified Western experts in the three chosen talk shows on the examined 114 days.

4.2 Results for research question 2

The second research question sounded as follows: *how do the Western experts featured in Russian political talk shows convey the Kremlin's strategic narratives to Russian domestic audiences?* To answer this question, first, the public persona of the identified Western experts was analysed, the role they play in the studio, and the dynamics there: how they are treated, to what extent do they identify with the country they are associated with, and how do they identify themselves. Based on the in-depth analysis of an episode featuring each Western expert, five categories were created. Second, to examine how they convey the strategic narratives of the Kremlin, these strategic narratives were reconstructed and described. Third, the narratives used by the Western experts were analysed and compared to the Kremlin's reconstructed, strategic narratives.

4.2.1 Typical behaviours of Western experts in Russian political talk shows

Western experts in the observed political talk shows tend to be treated and behave in highly different ways. As my earlier, less comprehensive comparison of Western experts in these talk shows described in the case study, certain Western experts are figuratively used as a punching bag, while others are treated with respect by the presenters and other guests (Takácsy, 2024b). The in-depth thematic analysis of a chosen episode for each identified Western expert allows the complex examination of their performances. The episodes were chosen as the most typical one for each, based on a subjective judgement after watching several episodes, striving for covering the entire observed period, keeping the observed performance dispersed from each other chronologically as much as possible. The analysis entails the dynamics of interactions with the presenters and other guests, the communication strategies used by the expert figure, the argumentations they use, the dramaturgy of the performance, and their self-representation in the show, if there is any. The Western experts' performances are going to be analysed in the order of the frequency of their appearances in the given period. For this part of the analysis, not only the English textual corpus of the talk shows is going to be analysed but the original episodes in Russian to be able to address each of the above-mentioned aspects (such as dramaturgy or stage dynamics). For the table on the analysis of the performances, see Annex IV.

Michael Bohm (Time Will Tell, 23.06.2022),⁷ title shown: journalist, USA

For context, the episode was aired a couple of days prior to the NATO Madrid summit (29-30.06.2022). The narrower topic is that the U.S. issued a warning to 14 countries mostly in Africa, that the Russian ships left ports near Ukraine with “stolen Ukrainian grain.” Before the floor was given to Michael Bohm, other guests have long argued for how cynical Americans and the collective West are (the guest prior lists that Turkey is not sanctioned for the violation of agreements on water supply making Syrian people suffer, and that the West does not care about other parts of the world starving). The presenter (Alexandr Gordon) strongly agrees with all these and passes the word to Bohm with clearly articulated disdain in his intonation, addressing him like an opponent for himself too, not as an impartial moderator of a debate but as a participant himself.

Bohm is clearly identified with the US by the presenter (“What are the internal problems? It was you who killed Gaddafi, not them,” says to him).⁸ During the “debate”, i.e. the clash between Gordon and Bohm, the camera shows longer Gordon’s face with a cynical, down-looking expression, while Bohm visibly nervously, in a fading voice tries to make through his argument Gordon even in his question laughs up. The hierarchy is clear for the viewer, along with who is positioned to be right. Gordon often interrupts him, and he agitatedly asks for permission to finish his sentence.⁹ He is often interrupted by other guests as well. Bohm, not a mother tongue speaker, audibly and visibly fights with the Russian language too, and the frequent interruptions and light scoldings from other guests do further weaken his position in the eyes of the audience. He loses his temper and shouts as the entire debate turns into a shouting tournament.¹⁰ His shouting transmits powerlessness, hence further his perceivably weak position in the debate.

As far as communication strategy, while he is forced in the corner from the very beginning, he is in a defensive position all along, sometimes resorting to irony (“Yes, global poverty will help America”).¹¹ The main topic of the debate Bohm takes part in

⁷ Chanel One, Time Will Tell, 23.06.2022 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-vypusk-ot-23-06-2022> , from 00:52:40. accessed on 05.10.2025

⁸ Ibid. 00:53:56

⁹ Ibid. 00:54:10

¹⁰ Ibid. 01:02:48

¹¹ Ibid. 01:06:24

turns into a power-play over guests and the presenter talking (or shouting) about how the U.S. profits from world hunger, and Bohm, more and more overwhelmed by emotions shouts in the defence of the U.S.¹² To the provocative language usage of Kremlin officials televised (Foreign Minister Lavrov blames Ukraine and its “Western owners” clearly referring among others to the U.S.),¹³ he does not respond to or challenges anything said, and even agrees to Lavrov blaming Ukraine and the Western countries for the crisis.

Audience interactions cannot be analysed here, as there was no live audience, but the TV’s audience is clearly targeted with visual elements hinting on how they should think about Bohm’s points. Often, when he talks, the camera is on either the presenters’ or the guests’ deeply unimpressed face, where the detectable emotions are disbelief, a sense of superiority and victory over an American who is weakly and powerlessly trying to defend a perceived American stance in a debate which is clearly impossible to win, as the presenter and guests alike apply “whataboutism”, interrupt him frequently, and is presented to provocative and often strongly biased content. In these cases, him not addressing them but agreeing makes the original stance stronger, or him trying to address them in an unconvincing way, visibly upset losing his temper also strengthens the show’s key narrative (here: the West is hypocritical, and applies double standards against Russia). He does not address or vocally acknowledge the situation or the environment he is in, i.e. that his room for manoeuvre is rather limited and all circumstances are against him.

Vladimir Sergienko (Time Will Tell, 03.03.2022),¹⁴ title shown: political scientist, Germany

The episode was aired within a week after Russia’s full-scale invasion started. The theme is the West’s hypocrisy, the presenters and guests alike blame Western countries to paying a simple lip service instead of getting involved and showcase the photos of suffering Ukrainian women and children, while, not providing humanitarian corridor to the peaceful citizens. (“So they show photos of unhappy children, so in Ukraine, who are sitting in bomb shelters. What prevents you from getting involved? And creating

¹² Ibid. 01:08:00

¹³ Ibid. 01:08:23

¹⁴ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 03.03.2022 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-03-03-2022> from 01:12:30 accessed on: 05.10.2025

humanitarian corridors for these people, for these children, women.”)¹⁵ Then guests debate how much Ukrainian civilians have already suffered in the last 8 years (from Ukrainian shelling) and hinting at Russia’s civilizational and pacifier role to play.

The other presenter Anatoly Kuzichev passes the floor to Sergienko asking whether Russians (“we”) have a chance to bring Ukrainian civilians who already adapted to suffering during those 8 years back to normal, civilised life. Sergienko, apparently identifies with the “we” he was addressed (i.e. Russians), and not with the country written in his title or country on the screen (Germany). He heavily criticizes European countries for “not wanting to minimize human losses” and “creating a special commission which would start to look for ways to stop the war.”¹⁶ “They are interested in prolonging this war as much as possible” he claims.¹⁷ He blames Europe of being a warmonger, and offers as a solution at the question of the presenter that 4 million refugees and gas prices of 2.5 euros would break Europe’s support for Ukraine. While he speaks, he exclusively blames Ukraine and Europe for the war and speculates how Europe’s support could be broken. He is treated with respect and certain familiarity, addressed as ‘Volodya’ (which is a kind, diminutive form of Vladimir, mostly used among close friends and family members). His Ukrainian origin is not mentioned, although the fact that his mother is currently in Lviv at a bomb shelter, is, but it is just dropped as a detail by him. Altogether his arguments fit in the choir of guests and presenters painting Europe as a hypocritical and blood-thirsty war monger. Also, to say “in Ukraine”, he consequently uses “*на Украине*” instead of “*в Украине*” which adheres to the Kremlin’s official rhetorics and is considered imperialistic by many. While in contemporary Russian, both versions are in use, they have gained certain political connotations. In the Russian dialect spoken in Ukraine, or to express support for Ukraine or the Ukrainian statehood, generally, the latter version is used (Kalutskov, 2017).

Sergienko being treated as equal also shows how during the discussion when he speaks, the camera is on his face. The entire atmosphere suggests unanimous views among the people present in the key questions, there is no heightened voice, or shouting debate. There is no live audience in the studio, but the all over impression transmitted to the

¹⁵ Ibid. 01:09:57

¹⁶ Ibid. 01:12:33

¹⁷ Ibid. 01:12:35

viewers is that Sergienko is an established expert, a serious man, who is apparently “one of us” (Russians). His association with Germany apparently serves for justifying his knowledge and knowledgeableness on European politics and media.

Alexandr Sosnovsky (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 30.10.2024),¹⁸ title: Editor-in-chief of the online outlet World Economy, Germany

The episode was aired about a week before US elections (05.11.2024). Prior to Sosnovsky taking the floor, the discussion focuses on bad American decisions taken in world politics. The guests criticize the American involvement in the Middle East and blame the bad specialists they have.¹⁹ Sosnovsky jumps in without being asked, when former Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Yevgeny Primakov is praised (on the occasion of the 95th anniversary of his birth) and shares a personal memory from 1999 when he had a discussion with Primakov at the airport in Bonn. This story clearly builds his credibility and importance as an expert in the eyes of the audience, and amongst the guests and presenters alike. Sosnovsky refers to himself as someone having an in-depth knowledge on German and European press and exclusive access to information only a few privileged people have,²⁰ and presents these to other guests as an insider in those European political circles. Based on his exclusive information (“private mailing”), he says that Ukraine is destined to lose the war, and Russia is to win.²¹ Also, to show how cynical and dishonest the West is, he remembers that

“One of the NATO officers in Brussels said that no matter how the war ends in favour of Russia, NATO will never recognize it as a Russian victory. That is, they have already set such a barrier for themselves, under which, no matter what happens, no matter how far Russia goes and what happens there, they will still say that it is not so, there is no Russian victory.”²²

He equates the paper on why Ukraine cannot win as a coordinated communication of a

¹⁸ Rossiya 1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 30.10.2024 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2886874>, from 01:08:00 accessed on 06.10.2025

¹⁹ Ibid. 01:08:05

²⁰ Ibid. 01:10:05

²¹ Ibid. 01:10:59

²² Ibid. 01:15:12

next U.S. administration:

*“This is such a moment that, I think, right now, before November 5-6, it just needs to be understood well. This paper didn't come out by chance. This paper came out so that Western politicians, I don't think he is the sole author of this paper, it's a manual to understand how to behave, including after the 5th of November.”*²³

Even though the presenter, Vladimir Solovyov does not interrupt him but patiently waits for him to finish his long-for-the-genre monologues (which often last over 3 minutes) and only asks clarifying questions, but without the impression of not respecting him. Sosnovsky, a mother tongue Russian, is clearly not being identified with the country his title shows (Germany) but is treated as “one of us” (Russians) by both the presenters and the guests, who accept his self-positioning as a man with in-depth knowledge on Western politics and media with exclusive access to information sources. He is addressed in a respectful way, is not provoked but listened to. His key narratives echo the Kremlin’s ones, and paint the West as deeply hypocritical, and applying double standards. His language mirrors a “realist” approach, referring to interests. In the studio there is no live audience, and during his speeches the camera is either on him or showing a grand total with all participants on stage, or the presenter Solovyov’s face nodding and visibly agreeing with his views.

Jiří Just (Time Will Tell, 26.02.2025),²⁴ journalist, Czechia

The episode was aired three days after the German parliamentary election (23.02.2025). The topics are quite general, but related to Ukraine, and as discussion starters, print screens of news articles are displayed, to which the guests react. One of the articles shown is about Latvia. Prior to Just getting the floor for longer monologues, the guests and presenters jointly humiliate European countries, laugh together at the existence of “Latvian industry”,²⁵ and about a headline according to which in Latvia “an astrologer and the head of intelligence talked about the threat of war”.²⁶ After the guests mock

²³ Ibid. 1:16:08

²⁴ Channel One, Time Will Tell 26.02.2025, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-26-02-2025> from 01:17:14, accessed on 06.10.2025

²⁵ Ibid. 01:17:37

²⁶ Ibid. 01:17:44

Latvians further and laugh at the possibility of the two professions being carried out by the same person, Just joins in joking that maybe the person has a side job.

He is not taken seriously, although is not treated with outright enmity either. He is addressed on a first name basis while other guests go by their family names. He is also dressed a significantly less formal than either the presenter of the guests, as he wears a lumberjack-looking, checkered flannel shirt and jeans whereas the others are in suit and tie. Whether this look was his own decision is unknown, but his overall performance gives the impression of an unserious, student-like man, who speaks with an uncertain tone amongst “serious men”. This impression is strengthened by his body language as well, he often slouches or leans on his desk, while others tend to stand straight and speak with self-confidence using a calm tone. This uncertain and unserious air in his performance is always present, although he speaks an excellent Russian, and has absolutely no language difficulties in expressing his views (unlike the American Michael Bohm). While he speaks, the camera often shows the other guests’ unimpressed face.²⁷ It clearly shows the TV audience how they should feel about the expressed opinions even in the absence of a live audience. He also takes part in shouting competitions with guests,²⁸ but takes part in them almost as an equal partner. Sometimes he is even praised by the presenter:

*“It is striking, to hear it from you. No, not from you, so to speak, like from you, you're a smart guy. But you're from the Czech Republic... (...)”*²⁹

As the citation shows, he is identified with his country, Czechia. Also, he is addressed in a somewhat diminutive way (“guy”, in Russian “парень”), which although fits into the amicable tone the presenter uses with him, still adds to the overall impression that he is a less serious participant than the *serious (Russian) men* on stage.

When he speaks, he identifies himself with Europe,³⁰ but agrees with the narrative of declining Europe voiced by the presenter and other guests. When they voice their criticism in a civilizational frame, painting the constant decay of European culture, he is

²⁷ Ibid. 01:19:00

²⁸ Ibid. 01:20:39

²⁹ Ibid. 01:32:46

³⁰ Ibid. 01:32:30

quick to agree:

*“Don't worry. We can avoid arguing about this because we can see that the agency of Europe is indeed declining against the backdrop of negotiations between Russia and the United States. It's obvious.”*³¹

His performance underpins the Kremlin's decaying, weakening West narrative, although on a realist ground, using realist arguments, predominantly referring to and describing world politics based on interests.

Yakov Kedmi (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.07.2023),³² title: public figure, Israel

The episode was aired on the first day of the NATO Summit in Vilnius (11.07.2023). The opening of the episode sets the harsh anti-Western tone for further discussion, as the presenter Vladimir Solovyov holds a long speech (over 7 minutes, which is long for a dynamic political talk show which aims at entertaining and engaging the audience), overviewing the entire Russian history in a nutshell, pinpointing that Russians used to live in peace, but now, Europe has shown its true face as it is a real warmonger.

*“We have lived in conditions of peace for a very long time. We have deceived ourselves for a long time, sometimes seeing the West as a friend, sometimes seeing the West as weak, sometimes seeing the West as pragmatic. None of this is accurate. Now we see how all these illusions fall apart, revealing their true face. The West sees the meaning of its existence in the struggle against us,”*³³ says Solovyov.

Then he continues describing Western states as a bunch of insufferable entities constantly working against each other, in unsustainable structures of international organizations. Then he talks about how Ukraine has targeted a nuclear facility using Western weapons

³¹ Ibid. 01:38:03

³² Rossiya 1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.07.2023, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2646558> accessed on 06.10.2025

³³ Ibid. 00:00:22

and poses a rhetorical question to Yakov Kedmi on how Russia should take revenge. Already in the question he accuses Europe of being hypocritically silent.

“The whole of Europe is silent about the attempt to strike a Russian nuclear facility. Should we respond symmetrically? Not only by using all our stockpile of cluster munitions, which we have for centuries ahead. And there will be no shortage of ammunition at all. Or should we then respond in kind and completely destroy all nuclear facilities in Ukraine?”³⁴

Kedmi congratulates Solovyov for the methodologically correct choice of word (i.e. “smash”, in Russian *раздачу́ть*). There are 7 invited experts in the studio, who surround Solovyov, and all the participants licit over each other listing Europe’s and the collective West’s criticism, without major clashes. Kedmi holds his first longer monologue about Turkey’s EU prospects, as he predicts the country to join the EU in the near future.³⁵ While he does not name NATO explicitly, he says that the United States “subjugated Europe to itself,”³⁶ and describes the EU as a vassal to the U.S. He praises Turkey for being the strongest and most developed country in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. He argues that Turkey is uncontrollable, and no outside power (especially the U.S.) can dominate it. He praises Erdogan personally for being a pragmatic and national interest driven leader. Kedmi also highlights the role of Hungary, which country according to him is unquestionably going to side with Turkey at every single option. The overall sense is that he sees that this uncontrollable Turkey, siding with Hungary, and potentially, Russia on the global scene, is going to be a gamechanger for Europe and break the dominance of the U.S., contributing to the forming of a multipolar, independent new world. The West is painted as a weak, decadent power by him, that fits in the long-running Kremlin narrative that only strong, sovereign leaders such as Putin or Erdogan defend their nations’ true interests, as opposed to Western leaders who are only the puppets of the U.S. and the global elites.

He also comments the NATO Vilnius summit, claiming and criticizing the alliance for having decided on Ukraine’s future NATO membership.

³⁴ Ibid. 00:06:40

³⁵ Ibid. 01:02:45

³⁶ Ibid. 01:02:35

“The Soviet Union made Ukraine a state. It didn't just make Ukraine a state. The Soviet Union created an economically developed state, giving it genuinely Russian territories. It created a magnificent industry, the second most important in the Soviet Union, a strong scientific base, achieving what it had never before. Ukraine was not only a recognized state within the Soviet Union, it became a member of the United Nations. Thanks to the Soviet Union. And now Ukraine had a chance, the only chance in history, to become a truly independent normal state and develop on the basis of what the Soviet Union gave it, what Russia gave it, its state. Everything ended in complete collapse. They looted, stole, squandered all the wealth they had left from the Soviet Union. Everything. That's what they are talking about in Vilnius and at the Vilnius meeting. They say Ukraine must be in NATO, it will be in NATO. Some say it cannot be accepted into NATO while there are military actions, only after military actions, and others say during military actions. But Ukraine cannot exist outside of NATO. In other words, they declared that NATO, membership in NATO, is the basis for Ukraine's existence. They signed a death sentence for the Ukrainian state.”³⁷

Consequently, he argues for NATO countries deciding Ukraine's future themselves, putting at stake the bare existence of Ukraine.

“There are no chances for anything there. Because it is impossible to have a state based on anti-Russia, Russophobia, Nazi ideology as a base against Russia. And there is no other Ukraine. And this is what is being stated now and will be stated in Vilnius. There is no Ukraine outside of this. And if there is no Ukraine outside of this, there is no Ukraine anymore.”³⁸

Kedmi is treated with respect both by the presenter and other guests. He is given time and space to express his thoughts in a slow, measured pace. The overall impression of his performance is that he is an old, wise, knowledgeable man, whose words and arguments the presenters and other guests pay attention to. Even his rhetorical pauses are not

³⁷ Ibid. 01:10:01

³⁸ Ibid. 01:12:40

interrupted,³⁹ while the programme's dynamic is generally a lot faster. The camera shows other participants as well while he speaks, who seem strongly thinking or agreeing with him. During the show, the in-person audience is not visible (if there is any). He is not verbally identified with Israel but talks and behaves as a Russian (he is also a mother tongue Russian). His overall image shows a Russian, who possesses deep knowledge on the Western security architecture.

John Varoli (Time Will Tell, 16.08.2025),⁴⁰ title: journalist, political scientist, USA

The episode is aired the day after the meeting of U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Alaska. The introductory theme with voice-over shows footage from the meeting, and the narration expresses a decent amount of Schadenfreude over the anger of 'Kyiv and other countries' who expected Trump being tougher on Putin.

Varoli is identified with his country and addressed by the presenter with his nationality: "please, tell us as an American, (...) how do you interpret this, as an American citizen?"⁴¹ The presenter, Anatoly Kuzichev asks him about the hysterical reaction of American media outlets to the meeting. He immediately assures him that he enjoys this panic tremendously.

"First of all, I really enjoy this hysteria in the Western press. You know, how much I enjoy it. Our liberals are in hysteria. In my opinion, two weeks ago I said that I even had this idea that maybe we were on the edge of a precipice. Maybe. They won't tell us. We know, maybe, in 20-30 years. What do I mean? I mean that there was such information from your Mr. Ryabkov. Ryabkov from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, right? That Russia has some kind of weapon that has no analogue in the world. Do I understand this information correctly?"⁴²

After the presenter assures him, he claims that the U.S. administration might have got to

³⁹ Ibid. 01:03:14

⁴⁰ Channel One , Time Will Tell, 16.08.2025 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/informacionnyy-kanal-vypusk-ot-16-08-2025>, from 01:17:38 accessed on 06.10.2025

⁴¹ Ibid. 01:18:17

⁴² Ibid. 01:19:22

know about the existence of a Russian superweapon, and he thinks this made Trump more amicable towards Trump, as “*the White House has finally understood who they are dealing with*”.⁴³

He talks about Russia’s inevitable victory and echoes the Kremlin’s narrative about Russia’s invincibility and the myth of the Russian magic weapons allegedly at stock, not appearing at the battlefield. Varoli’s performance is significantly shorter than of other guests in the episode (or of other Western experts usually in the same show). Although he stays there physically, besides two speeches (1,5 minutes⁴⁴ and 0,5 minute⁴⁵ respectively) he largely stays silent. His performance is still valuable for furthering the Kremlin’s talking points: an American, who agrees with us (Russians) and ridicules Western liberals himself, acknowledges Russia’s invincibility and strengths. He presents himself as a realist, and is treated with relative respect, although addressed on first name basis (John) while other guests are typically not. The atmosphere around him is not hostile, the presenter Kuzichev even helps him with certain words to further his talking points.

Gregor Spitzen (Time Will Tell, 01.08.2025),⁴⁶ title: political scientist, independent journalist, Germany

On the day of the episode, Donald Trump announced that as a response to Dmitry Medvedev’s threats, the U.S. would move two of its nuclear submarines closer to Russia. The topic, however, is not this, but that a week before, on 24 June 2025 Zelensky submitted a draft bill which according to criticisms would have “effectively destroyed the independence” of the Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office (SAPO) and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) (Fornusek *et al.*, 2025). While it is the day of the episode that Volodimir Zelensky signed a law to restore the independence of these bodies, the programme’s topic is not this (i.e. the solution of the situation), but the outrage on Ukraine’s streets, Ukraine’s corruption and Europe’s allegedly weak reaction. As a last longer speech of a guest, Nikita Danyuk before Spitzen summarizes:

⁴³ *ibid*: 01:21:20

⁴⁴ *Ibid*. 01:08:43

⁴⁵ *Ibid*. 01:19:28

⁴⁶ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.08.2025, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-01-08-2025>, from 01:52:00, accessed on 07.10.2025

“This analogy of feeding society with feces is 100% about the current situation, actually, in the so-called state of Ukraine. But there is an important point here. Why is Europe's reaction so restrained? Because they had to taste it too. Excuse me, when so demonstratively, you become the curator of this state, in fact, it only functions with your help. A law is absolutely voluntaristically accepted, which deprives the West of the opportunity to control this corruption agenda in Ukraine. Then once again we see that there is no independence in Ukraine, because the West hit Zelensky on the head and so on. These, these are very important. Cardboard, cardboard rallies. It was a cardboard Maidan. It was Maidan not in the context of a change of power. It was Maidan in the context of what you are doing, stop. Naturally, these were, you know, such Potemkin villages, but the fact that this crisis is evident, and it has put absolutely everyone in a bad light, starting from Zelensky, ending with Europe and the West, indicates that the further we go, the worse it gets. There will be more and more of such moments happening.”⁴⁷

Spitzen is asked by the presenter, how did Europe see this. He, joining online from Rostock, according to the programme, acts like a local correspondent for a media outlet. He describes how after the start of the invasion the mainstream, high-quality German outlets became anti-Russian propaganda channels, but this fiasco in Ukraine sobered them, and started to uncover Ukrainian corruption. He also hints that the West might be unwilling to continue to work with Zelensky in the future.

“It was just amazing. Professionalism has returned to German media. It was simply incredible. But, you know, after all the negativity that has been poured on Zelensky in the pages of German media now, when, you know, the leitmotif of such publication was that we thought Zelensky was good, but he turned out to be something else. Honestly, I don't know how they will continue to work with this person.”⁴⁸

Both the presenter Olesia Loseva and Spitzen take for granted that Europe is dissatisfied with Zelensky and would “eliminate” him, whatever that should mean (in Russian they use the word *устранение*, which means elimination):

⁴⁷ Ibid. 01:48:09

⁴⁸ Ibid. 01:52:30

“But I want to understand, right, Gregor, is Europe generally satisfied with Zelensky's behaviour or is there still a continuation towards his removal and elimination?”⁴⁹ asks Loseva.

Spitzen is quick to paint the picture of a chaotic country on the brink of collapse, where European leaders already turned away from Zelensky.

“There is strong dissatisfaction with Zelensky, and after all the negativity that was poured out from the pages of German and European press on Zelensky, I highly doubt that they are betting on him. (...) The chaos and instability in the current Ukrainian elites also did not escape the attention of Western media. The fact that Zelensky is increasing the number of Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) personnel in case of a possible military revolution. This also did not go unnoticed by German journalists. So, you know, there is no good without bad. The professional somehow returns to the German media, and, in general, apparently comes to the understanding that it's time to finish with Zelensky. Not in a physical sense, but specifically as a political figure, because he no longer satisfies absolutely everyone, even those who installed anti-corruption bodies. We do not hide that these are the supporters of London, Washington, and Brussels, the same liberal Deep State, who were specifically put in place to monitor Zelensky's activities, so that he does not excessively exceed the limits in embezzling Western tranches. But, in fact, the limits have been crossed, and now, apparently, they are no longer betting on him.”⁵⁰

While he speaks, on the shared screen TV viewers can see various footages of Ukraine, transmitting the message that this country turns into chaos: angry protesters on the streets with flags,⁵¹ then Zelensky at a press conference next to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, talking about something with a visibly upset facial expression,⁵² where he is amongst European politicians such as Macron, and instances of Valery Zaluzhny holding speeches,⁵³ probably suggesting that he could be Zelensky's successor. On the tripartite

⁴⁹ Ibid. 01:53:55

⁵⁰ Ibid. 01:54:04

⁵¹ Ibid. 01:54:55

⁵² Ibid. 01:52:10

⁵³ ibib. 01:54:44

screen during these footages, Spitzen is shown speaking, and the presenter Loseva eagerly nodding to his words. He is treated as an equal, is not identified with Germany, but is treated rather as a news channel's correspondent in Germany, even though the fact that he is in Germany is apparently important, as it is highlighted by the presenter both at the start and at the end of his performance. His key narrative was that Ukraine is a terribly corrupt place, and Zelensky is the West's puppet, but as his corrupt nature was unveiled, Europe turned away from Zelensky and is not to continue keeping him in power. This aligns with the Kremlin's overarching narratives, both Zelensky being a Western puppet and Ukraine being unbearably corrupt.

Xavier Moreau (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 05.04.2022),⁵⁴ title: expert of the Stratpol Political-Strategic Analysis Centre

The episode was aired the day after the Bucha massacre was uncovered, shocking and put in the headlines across the Western world.

Moreau's national identification is interesting. His French nationality is not written in his title, and it is missing also from his other appearances in the same show in the observed period. Still, verbally, he is clearly identified with it and asked, "as a French". However, when asked by the presenter Vladimir Solovyov "what will our French comrades say?",⁵⁵ he proudly states he has Russian citizenship, hearing which Solovyov laughs.⁵⁶ Also, his strong French accent makes it most likely difficult for the audience to dissociate him from his nationality and forget where he is from. When he speaks, he apparently identifies with Russia and uses "we" in this sense.

*"I have both bad and good news for us. The bad news is that we have truly lost the communication war. And the good news is that it doesn't matter to us. Because now the Russian army will win in Ukraine. For now. For now. I don't want to delete the forecasts again. And this also explains why this provocation happened. Bucha. Bucha."*⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov 05.04.2022 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2398430> from 01:18:18, accessed on 07.10.2025

⁵⁵ Ibid. 01:18:15

⁵⁶ Ibid. 01:18:18

⁵⁷ Ibid. 01:18:23

Also, when he refers to the West, he does it in an othering way, as “them” and “they”. Based on his phrases, he considers himself part of the community of Russians.

*“It seems to me that for the West this is a crucial battle. This is their last chance to regain the initiative. And they will throw everything they have. But if they start using such a provocation now, it means that they will really lose, and they know it. And, for example, today Stoltenberg himself said that we all know here that the number one goal is the army of Donbass, and that the next weeks will be very important. Therefore, they understand that they will lose. And they are using an old provocation (...)”*⁵⁸

Also, any good news for Russia he considers good news for himself as well as opposed to “them”, the West:

*“I also remember in April 2018, when they said that chemical weapons were used in Syria. But what did they do afterwards? They warned Russia that we would send missiles in a day. And of course, Russia didn't say anything to Syria. And therefore, if they are at this point, it means that for Russia, for us, this is very good news. Secondly, there are already some small good news. There were studies in France that were shocking, and they officially showed them. All the media that are now anti-Russian said that 52% of French people understand why Russia is doing this. And this is a big failure. It means that it didn't work out so well for them, and therefore there is also something that happens in the future.”*⁵⁹

He also predicts (and frames as good news) that as on the one hand, French people “saw through the anti-Russian media” and “understand” Russia’s deeds and goals, and on the other hand, gasoline prices are soaring, they would quickly get tired of the war hinting that the French political support for Ukraine is to end soon.⁶⁰

He ridicules French media, and laughs at it and their assessment of the Russian army

⁵⁸ Ibid. 01:18:48

⁵⁹ Ibid. 01:19:20

⁶⁰ Ibid. 01:20:23

together with Solovyov as the following dialogue shows:

“Moreau: “First, in France, they told us that the Russian army was destroyed. That soon the Ukrainian army would be near Moscow. And now there is such a statement. What an unpleasant situation.

Solovyov: What a nuisance!

Moreau: And we didn't even know. It's even funny. And there they will send a general to the largest French channel, who explains that, yes, Russia, they don't have an army, they are very disappointed, they thought they were strong. And now there is no such performance anymore.”⁶¹

The amicable atmosphere is evident, and the shared views among them as well. When Moreau speaks, the camera shows him, or Solovyov nodding, and apparently, agreeing with him. During his speech, there is no live audience shown. He is treated as an equal, as a Westerner who “got on the right track”, refuses and despises where he comes from, and laughs at the West’s faults, and weaknesses together with the Russians that he considers himself to be as well.

Jakub Korejba, (Time Will Tell, 19.07.2023),⁶² title: candidate of political sciences, journalist, Poland

The show is aired a week after the Vilnius NATO summit (11-12.07.2023). The topic Korejba is interviewed online, is Poland opening a reconstruction office in Ukraine, and Ukraine’s reconstruction in the future.

Korejba is invited to the discussion in a somewhat friendly way but clearly positioning him as the representative of an enemy country, who is supposed to represent the “enemy”. He is identified by his nationality and addressed as a “nimble Pole” (“шустрый поляк”).

“Look, here's how it's expressed by the original source, a nimble Pole who is

⁶¹ Ibid. 01:21:39

⁶² Channel One, Time Will Tell, 19.07.2023, <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-19-07-2023>, accessed on 07.10.2025

*currently in direct contact with us, this is not my term. His name is, I repeat, Jakub Korejba. Jakub, please tell us, our, so to speak, well, I don't know, considerations, maybe fantasies regarding, there, well, reconquista or creeping invasion, or there, about creeping expansion, do they have any grounds? ”*⁶³

Korejba identifies with Poland, and with the West (and Ukraine) when he speaks, and talks about future Ukrainian successes on the battlefield as “ours”.

*“Just a year ago, we didn't even dream of the Dnieper line. And now, it turns out, we are in a big plus, and since approximately last autumn, the territory of Ukraine has been constantly expanding, the prospects of these bonuses, these advantages are exciting, interesting, and broad. ”*⁶⁴

He is addressed by the “ТЫ” form, but this amicableness is reciprocal, as he also calls the presenter in the diminutive form of his name, Tolya. In a friendly tone, the presenter sums up that Korejba considers himself among the smart imperialists (there are also dumb ones, and fantasizers too, he adds) and recalls an old imperialistic joke he heard from Korejba long ago. The joke (where the punchline says that Lviv is the most beautiful Polish city) serves to highlight not only Korejba’s imperialistic views but also the friendly relations between Korejba and the presenter, which in the eye of the audience lifts and portrays him as an equal participant of the discussion.⁶⁵

While Korejba speaks, the tripartite screen shows a military map of Ukraine, the presenter Anatoly Kuzichev, and him. He tries to use a realist language, and takes a hawkish stance, painting a threatening future for Russians where Ukraine might even expand towards Russia after gaining back its original territories of 1991.

“And in a practical, territorial sense, well, you know, if I were a Russian patriot, I would not think about Lviv, but about the territories that Ukraine can annex, because, well, there are two approaches to the territory of Ukraine. There is crude imperialism, but those are the ones who want to detach and divide Ukraine. And

⁶³ Ibid. 01:44:47

⁶⁴ Ibid. 01:45:11

⁶⁵ Ibid. 01:47:37

there is smart imperialism, which includes people like me, who want Ukraine to grow with new territories, to make Ukraine as big as possible. And since this is actually happening, since last year Ukraine has been increasing its territory, Ukrainian authorities timidly, modestly mention the line of 1991, but from my point of view, and from the perspective of people like me in Poland, there are quite a few, this is a very modest project. I think there is evidence for Ukraine to continue expanding east of the 1991 line. And the more Ukraine there is, the greater our Polish strategic depth.”

Korejba actively engages in a dialogue with the presenter, unlike many other experts (including some other Western experts on this list) who prefer to hold a few longer monologues themselves. This vivid dialogue lasts for over half an hour, which is quite long in contrast to some of the other Western experts’ appearances. Here, the discussion with the presenter and other guests is dynamic, with shorter and quicker answers, questions, and interventions. The tone of it still does not turn into a shouting competition as it can in other cases. One of the guests even appreciatively notices that Korejba is a MGIMO graduate,⁶⁶ most likely, in the sense that he can argue convincingly.

Korejba’s performance is an exception from the other analysed Western experts’. His narratives do not directly underpin the Kremlin’s strategic narratives, do not claim the West to be weak, decaying, hypocritical or anything similar, but underpin the narrative that it is only military strengths and interests that matter in world politics. His crude realist, hawkish views fit in well in the Kremlin’s worldview, and validate the Kremlin’s fears of the aggressive West, threatening Russia. His role is that of an acknowledged Polish imperialist’s.

4.2.2 Conclusion to the results of the first research question

The Western experts appearing in the three chosen political talk shows on the observed 114 days present a colourful picture both with regard to how they behave, and how they are treated. Based on this, a heuristic exploratory model typology was created. Respect from the presenters and guests shown or not shown towards the expert does not seem to be contingent on age, or even the views of the given expert. There is a correlation,

⁶⁶ Ibid. 02:05:33

however between the behaviour of guests and presenters: in none of the observed 10 cases did it occur that any of the guests would have behaved disrespectfully towards the Western experts when the presenter was respectful. As opposed to this, if the presenter addressed the Western expert in a disrespectful way, other guests allowed themselves to do the same. The comprehensive table showing the results of the analysis of the Western experts' performance is to be found in Annex IV.

Respect shown towards certain Western experts is not contingent on the country they are associated with. For instance, in the case of two Americans, one of them, Michael Bohm is treated as a punching bag, disdained by and laughed at by the presenter and guests, while John Varoli is treated as equal, regarded with respect, not interrupted or laughed at even once. Also, it does not depend on how eloquently the given expert speaks Russian. While all observed Russian mother tongue experts were shown respect to, others, who sometimes speak with grammatical errors or a strong accent fell in this category, such as John Varoli or Xavier Moreau. Even more interestingly, being treated with respect does not even seem to depend on the views voiced. Jakub Korejba, who is not only introduced as someone in an enemy position but during all his performance he coherently represents a highly hawkish stance towards Russia, is treated with respect and acknowledgement in the studio. Another interesting finding is that the roles experts play can be subject to change, as the example of Jakub Korejba shows. Whereas earlier, Polish media describes his performance in the Russian media as a “punching bag” (Wiadomosci, 2021), based on the found and analysed episode he was treated with relatively respectfully.

Country associated with	Name	Mother tongue Russian	Treated as equal	Regularly interrupted	Laughed at by the presenter	Intonation/gestures of the presenter (did disdain appear at least once)?
USA	Michael Bohm	no	no	yes	yes	disdain
Germany	Vladimir Sergienko	yes	yes	no	no	respect
Germany	Alexandr Sosnovsky	yes	yes	yes	no	respect
Czechia	Jiří Just	no	no	no	no	disdain

Israel	Yakov Kedmi	yes	yes	no	no	respect
USA	John Varoli	no	yes	no	no	respect
Germany	Gregor Spitzen	yes	yes	no	no	respect
France	Xavier Moreau	no	yes	no	no	respect
Poland	Jakub Korejba	no	yes	yes	no	respect

Table 6. The assessment of the examined Western experts' chosen talk show appearances.

Respect towards Western experts also does not depend on the way they are addressed, whether it is the *mbi* or *Bbi* form. The humiliated, laughed at Michael Bohm is addressed with the *Bbi* form by the guests and presenters, while the respected Jakub Korejba is by *mbi*. Also, respect does not seem to be contingent upon whether the Western expert agrees with the overarching West-critical propaganda framing which suggests that the West is hypocritical, weak or decadent. This framing prevails in these political talk shows, voiced by the presenters and other guests alike, which in different way and to a different extent, but is agreed to by the observed experts, with the sole exception of Jakub Korejba. It is also not contingent on age. In the following table the birth years of these expert figures are listed, and with their estimated age on 24 February 2022. Estimation, as their birth months are not always publicly available, but even these are suitable for an approximate comparison. While one could think that age equals respectful treatment, and a younger age does not, it is not proven, as for instance, the American journalist Michael Bohm, aged approximately 57 at the start of the invasion was not being treated with respect, while his significantly younger colleagues Gregor Spitzen (39) and Jakub Korejba (37) were.

Country associated with	Name	Year of birth	Age at the start of the invasion of 2022 (ca.)	Mother tongue Russian?	Agrees to the key propagandistic statements on the West? (ex. hypocritical, weak, decadent)
USA	Michael Bohm	1965	57	no	agrees - the West is hypocritical
Germany	Vladimir Sergienko	1971	51	yes	agrees - the West is hypocritical

Germany	Alexandr Sosnovsky	1955	67	yes	agrees - the West is hypocritical
Czechia	Jiří Just	1983	39	no	agrees - the West is weak
Israel	Yakov Kedmi	1947	75	yes	agrees - the West is hypocritical
USA	John Varoli	1968	54	no	agrees - the West is hypocritical
Germany	Gregor Spitzen	1983	39	yes	agrees - the West is hypocritical
France	Xavier Moreau	1972	50	no	agrees - the West is hypocritical
Poland	Jakub Korejba	1985	37	no	does not agree

Table 7. The assessment of certain features of the examined Western experts.

The Western experts' identification with the country they are associated with shows certain patterns. Those with a Russian mother tongue (Vladimir Sergienko, Alexandr Sosnovsky, Gregor Spitzen and Yakov Kedmi), are not identified with the country they are associated with, and they do not refer to themselves as part of these communities either. If and when they use “we”, they seem to refer to Russians, hence, identify themselves as such. They are treated and behave as Russians with an immense knowledge on European politics, and as a subgroup of this, Spitzen giving more of a shorter, superficial overview on Germany (online, from Rostock) gives the impression of a local correspondent of a television. The other, non-Russian mother tongue Western experts are directly associated with the country they represent by the presenter, and when they refer to “us”, they understand by it either their nation or the entire West. The only exception to this is Xavier Moreau, who is addressed to as “a French comrade” by the presenter, but corrects him quickly that he is a Russian citizen, and when he refers to “us”, from the context of his words it is clear that he means “us, Russians”.

Considering all the criteria for comparison, the 9 identified Western experts can be put into 5 categories according to the role they play in the observed Russian political talk shows, based on how they are treated and shown to the Russian audiences.

1) **The punching bag (“the Westerner we can win over”)** - Michael Bohm (United States of America)

A Western expert, originally, from the country he is associated with, speaking Russian with a strong foreign accent and grammatical mistakes, representing the country of the “enemy,” laughed at and verbally humiliated. In the case of Bohm

the fact that he is from the U.S. is apparently important: he is the most frequently appearing from the observed Western experts, who is put in a clearly disadvantageous position, where he is tasked with defending a perceived U.S. stance, but the conditions are against him. He is not treated as equal but provoked to the extent that he uses his temper and is visibly upset but still is unable to defend his stance. Hence in the TV audience the transmitted message is that “we” (Russians) won over the U.S. Also, while he performatively clashes with the presenter and other guests, narrative-wise aligns with them, for instance in agreeing with the ever-present West-criticism (i.e. the West is weak, or hypocritical).

- 2) **Russians with a deep understanding of the West** - Vladimir Sergienko (Germany), Alexandr Sosnovsky (Germany), Yakov Kedmi (Israel), Gregor Spitzen (Germany)

Western experts, originally from Russia (or the Soviet Union). Mother tongue Russians, whose title always refers to their “otherness”, hence, apparently it is important in giving the desired credibility in the eyes of the audience, but the persons themselves are never identified or addressed according to their “Western” attribute. They are treated and behave as Russians, with an inherently deep knowledge on the country they are identified with in their title. They are unquestionably treated with respect by the presenter and other guests, and their narratives underpin the Kremlin’s strategic narratives about the West.

- 3) **Somewhat unserious, but “smart Western guy”**- Jiří Just (Czechia)

This category bears certain similarities to the “punching bag” category, but in a much lighter form. Just is put in an uncomfortable position, and receives a certain disdain for what he says, but is not outright ridiculed or humiliated. He is a Westerner, who is somewhat unserious (called a “smart guy” but he is presented in a slightly condescending way), but is not treated as a truly knowledgeable, serious man (like the other, Russian expert guests in suits), while he wears jeans and a lumberjack-shirt. While he refutes certain statements the presenter or guests make, hence, he engages in debates, he agrees to the overarching narratives on the “hypocritical West” and is a partner in ridiculing and laughing at European countries, together with his Russian colleagues on stage, actively validating their

anti-Western narratives.

4) **Westerner, who got on the right track** - John Varoli (United States of America), Xavier Moreau (France)

These Western experts are from the country they are identified with, but either do actively criticize and ridicule that (Varoli), or outright try to uncouple themselves from it, bragging with their Russian citizenship and as “we” talking about Russians, not their country or nationality of origin (Moreau). Their shared feature is that they actively engage in criticizing the West, openly siding with Russia’s stance in any question that occurs, hence, strongly validating the Kremlin’s narratives on the weak, decaying, hypocritical West. They are treated with respect, like “good Westerners” who got on the right track.

5) **Acknowledged adversary imperialist** - Jakub Korejba (Poland)

This Western expert is an outlier in many ways, probably this is why he only appeared in a single episode during the observed 114 days, as opposed to the others who appeared significantly more often (He appeared in one episode, while the most featured Michael Bohm in 49). Korejba is positioned as a representative of the enemy, and also behaves as such, but treated with respect and a kind of “comraderie”. He is the only Western expert observed who does not agree to the typical anti-Western narratives at all. He speaks as a Polish imperialist, represents a hawkish, anti-Russian stance, but apparently the very fact that he uses the realist, geopolitical rhetoric makes it respectable for the presenter and guests, who themselves do the same. He is an acknowledged Polish imperialist, whose performance underpins the Kremlin’s rhetoric about the warmonger West, who is interested in the fall of Russia, hence, might resonate perfectly the Kremlin’s “Russia is a besieged fortress” narrative for the Russian audiences.

Country associated with	Name	Mother tongue Russian?	Treated as equal?	Identified by the country associated with	Category

USA	Michael Bohm	no	no	yes	Punching bag
Germany	Vladimir Sergienko	yes	yes	no	Russian, with deep knowledge of the West
Germany	Alexandr Sosnovsky	yes	yes	no	Russian, with deep knowledge of the West
Czechia	Jiří Just	no	no	yes	Somewhat unserious, but "smart guy"
Israel	Yakov Kedmi	yes	yes	no	Russian, with deep knowledge of the West
USA	John Varoli	no	yes	yes	Westerner got on the right track
Germany	Gregor Spitzen	yes	yes	no	Russian, with deep knowledge of the West/ Correspondent
France	Xavier Moreau	no	yes	yes	Westerner got of the right track
Poland	Jakub Korejba	no	yes	yes	Acknowledged Polish imperialist

Table 8. The categorization of the examined Western experts.

4.2.3 The Kremlin's reconstructed strategic narratives

The Kremlin's narratives were reconstructed from the four Kremlin officials' statements aired on the examined 114 days, in the three chosen political talk shows.⁶⁷ The vast textual corpus of the entire episodes (3635 pages or 2 561 554 words) was then filtered using a Visual Basic Editor macro in Microsoft Word to these four people. The cleaned text (163 pages or 88 014 words) was then coded in NVivo manually, and the Kremlin's strategic narratives were reconstructed. As the first step, an inductive approach of thematic analysis was used described as Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) to code the corpus. No pre-defined codebook was used, the codes and themes emerged through the repeated reading of the text and the identification of the repeatedly occurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Based on this, a codebook was created (Annex V).

Coherent speaker interventions/ thematic passages expressing one or more narrative claims were taken as the units for coding. As the second step, the principles of narrative analysis described by Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) were applied to examine the

⁶⁷ Analysing the relation of narratives used at the earlier stage of the full-scale invasion and the ones applied later falls beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it could be a possible way of continuing the research. As an example, in 2022, theoretically it was still possible to assume that the West would be seriously damaged by its own sanctions, especially those related to energy and hydrocarbons, but then such assumptions turned out to be unfounded.

thematic patterns and reconstruct the narrative structures (Riessman, 2008). A robustness check was conducted on a purposive select of subsamples using open coding, the results of which are going to be detailed later, under the point 4.2.4.

In the following chapter, the reconstructed master narratives are going to be described and analysed in detail, demonstrating the key elements of these narratives with three quotations from these talk show episodes.

From the coverage of the three chosen talk shows on the 114 examined days, the four official talking heads were featured on 99 days, in 136 episodes, hence on the 87% of examined days, at least one of the four chosen Kremlin official was featured. The most featured official talking head unsurprisingly, was Vladimir Putin, who appeared in 113 episodes, Dmitry Peskov appeared in 10, Maria Zakharova in 7, and Margarita Simonyan in 6. Vladimir Putin's speeches were almost always pre-recorded and were held at an event, then played and commented by the in-person guests in the studio except for the few occasions when he talked in a live stream to the presenters. Dmitry Peskov's appearances were also pre-recorded words, along with the majority of Maria Zakharova's, however, she attended the show in-person as a speaker, 4 times. Margarita Simonyan was present in-person in all her appearances.

Talk show	Episodes	Days
Evening with Vladimir Solovyov	25	22
Time Will Tell	45	31
60 Minutes	74	46
All episodes with official talking head	136	-
Number of days with at least one official talking head featured	-	99

Table 9. Summary of the episodes examined, and the observed Kremlin's officials' appearances in the chosen talk show episodes.

Name	Number of shows featured in
Vladimir Putin	113
Dmitry Peskov	10

Maria Zakharova	7
Margarita Simonyan	6
All episodes in which at least one of the four Kremlin official talking heads were featured	136

Table 10. Summary of the appearances of the observed Kremlin officials in the chosen talk shows.

“Western sanctions are bad”

Sub-narrative 1- sanctions are bad for the world

Sub-narrative 2 - sanctions are bad or ridiculous (ineffective against, or even beneficial for Russia)

This narrative frames Western sanctions as self-destructive acts, which are deemed to backfire economically, morally and geopolitically alike, instead of legitimate instruments of international accountability. It appears constantly in the Kremlin’s discourse in the examined period and serves three purposes: to deflect blame from Russia, delegitimize Western policy and reassert Russia’s perceived moral and systemic resilience. In this story, short-sighted but malicious Western leaders take sanctions, which are to cause a global catastrophe, jeopardize food security, disrupt energy markets and besides hurting Western countries, they harm the poor people across the globe. Simultaneously, they are depicted as ineffective and even ridiculous, unable to break Russia’s stability, or even pictured as a stimulus to Russia’s own development. Ultimately, the narrative transforms the story of a punishment into Russia’s triumph and global justice, suggesting that Western sanctions contribute to the collapse of the “American-led world order” and to a new, just, multipolar era. This narrative prevailed immediately on the 24 February 2022 for instance voiced by the sanctioned Margarita Simonyan herself and returned whenever new sanctions packages were announced either by a group of Western countries and their allies (such as 4 July 2022) or the European Commission (such as 17 July 2023). The following table showcases the causal and discursive logic of this narrative.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
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Cause	Western governments impose sanctions on Russia, allegedly to “punish aggression.”	Reference to “unfounded accusations,” “geopolitical tragedy,” “anti-Russian hysteria.”
Effect on the world	Sanctions trigger energy and food crises, hurting the Global South and Europe.	“Shortage of fertilizers,” “soaring prices,” “poorest countries suffer.”
Effect on the West	Sanctions backfire: inflation, loss of competitiveness, “energy crisis.”	“Millions of Europeans affected,” “they cannot do without Russian gas.”
Effect on Russia	Russia adapts and thrives, proving its resilience and technological self-sufficiency.	“We lived without iPhones,” “first in space under sanctions,” “agriculture flourishes.”
Moral conclusion	Sanctions expose Western hypocrisy and accelerate the decline of the liberal order.	“They have already lost,” “collapse of the American world order.”

Table 11. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1 - sanctions are bad for the world

The following quotations represent key elements of the narrative:

*“Against the backdrop of minimal food reserves in the world, new sanctions are being introduced... Not all countries can purchase the necessary volume of fertilizers for the current season, which means that crop yields will decrease... developed countries will try to buy up, divert food flows to themselves, and thereby exacerbate the food shortage in the poorest regions of the world.”*⁶⁸

This excerpt shows how sanctions are framed as an act of global injustice, turning Western governments into the villains of the story, who deprive poor countries of food. The causal chain, according to which sanctions cause fertilizer shortage, which leads to famine and new migration waves externalizes the blame for global crises and shifts moral responsibility onto the West instead of Russia. It appeals to a humanitarian logic, while justifies Russia’s own export controls at the same time.

⁶⁸ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 05.04.2022, 00:53:37 (Vladimir Putin), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2398386>, accessed on: 13.10.2025

Sub-narrative 2 - sanctions are bad or ridiculous (ineffective against, or even beneficial for Russia)

*“Listen, we lived without iPhones, we will live without Paris. It’s not a problem. Not because of isolation, even if there will be isolation.”*⁶⁹

Sanctions are trivialized through sarcasm and nostalgia. The “iPhones and Paris” motif evokes both material deprivation and cultural disobedience and suggest that the true Russian identity transcends Western consumerism. The humour and emotional tone create a common pride and stoic mood therefore this rhetorical move converts vulnerability and deprivation into moral superiority.

*“They should have understood that they had already lost from the very beginning of our special military operation, because its beginning means the beginning of a radical collapse of the American world order... a transition from liberal-globalist American ethnocentrism to a truly multipolar world.”*⁷⁰

In this excerpt the speaker merges the sanctions debate into a larger civilizational meta-narrative, according to which sanctions do not only fail, but they mark the last days of a hegemonic system. This is the discursive pinnacle of the narrative, as sanctions themselves become the proof that history itself is on Russia’s side, legitimizing both the country’s economic endurance and validating its willingness to continue the geopolitical confrontation.

“The pitiful West”

Sub-narratives:

- 1) Western weapons to Ukraine end up in bad hands
- 2) Culturally decaying Europe
- 3) Ungrateful Europe

⁶⁹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 24.02.2025, 00:15:37 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387299>, accessed on: 13.10.2025

⁷⁰ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 07.07.2022, 01:31:45 (Vladimir Putin), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2440005>, accessed on: 13.10.2025

4) The West is weak

This strategic narrative portrays the West as morally, culturally and politically degenerate and decaying, as an entity which squandered its former glorious, civilizational mission. This is why, the once respected West is now an object of pity and ridicule, exclusively by its own fault. The various sub-narratives enable the Kremlin's discourse to construct the image of the West in irreversible decline, a direct result of its hypocrisy, greed and liberal extremities. This strategic narrative serves two main goals when targeting Russian domestic audiences. On the one hand, it justifies Russia's perpetual confrontation with the West, by arguing that the latter has proven unworthy of leadership and being an example to follow. On the other hand, it reassures the target audience that Russia stands on the right side of history, representing moral superiority, historic resilience and consistency. The "pitiful West" narrative delegitimizes Western civilization as a whole and constructs the image of the West as a cautionary tale, as a civilization which collapsed under its own contradictions, excessive liberalism, inability to maintain order, its values and identity. This narrative is not tied to event but is rather permanently present.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Western elites pursue anti-Russian policies and "moral crusades."	"They pour money and weapons into Ukraine," "teach us lessons about civilization."
Moral inversion	The very instruments of their moral superiority backfire at home.	"Weapons sent to Ukraine are used against their own police" (against their own authorities at home).
Cultural decay	Western societies have lost their humanistic roots, replaced by sterile liberalism.	"They squeeze humanists out of their own culture."
Historical amnesia and ingratitude	The West owes its civilization to Russia yet treats it with contempt.	"We saved Europe from the Tatar-Mongol yoke."
Collapse and ridicule	The West becomes weak, absurd, and clownish.	"Britain — circus. France — circus. A world ruled by clowns."

Moral conclusion	The West's decline proves the justice of Russia's path.	"They swing from one extreme to another," "we stand firm while they collapse."
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Table 12. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) Western weapons to Ukraine end up in bad hands (moral and security collapse of the West)

*"The weapons supplied to Kyiv end up in the hands of those very protesters. And they are being used against the police there in France. The very weapons supplied by the West, NATO and France itself, the very money they pour into Ukraine... like a boomerang, hit their own people."*⁷¹

The quotation describes the horrors to come at Western countries, whose leaders irresponsible handed out weapons to Ukraine, but as they are weak and powerless to control the further route of these weapons, those end up in bad hands and turn against them in their homeland. The moral logic of the West is reversed here, as its attempt to "help" Ukraine, turns into self-harm. The boomerang metaphor embodies the idea of karmic justice and suggests that Western *hubris* and self-indulgency inevitably hit back. Therefore, it can also be understood as a moral allegory or a cautionary tale. The West's weak decision-making capabilities and clumsy way of supporting the undeserving Ukraine in the end to destroy it from within.

Sub-narrative 2) Culturally decaying Europe (loss of humanism, and the self-destruction of culture)

*"They squeeze humanists out of their own culture."*⁷²

Western unawareness of their own old values and the cultural self-annihilation can be observed in this minimalist sentence, which compresses a complex cultural diagnosis into

⁷¹ Channel-One, Time Will Tell, 06.07.2023, 00:58:35 (Maria Zakharova), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-07-06-2023> accessed on 13.10.2025

⁷² Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 08.06.2023, 00:24:42 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2629754>, accessed on 13.10.2025

a moral lament. True European humanism which apparently, according to the speaker, implicitly allied with Russian values, is being expelled by the contemporary liberal canon. The statement evokes nostalgia for an imagined “old Europe”, which Russia takes the place of, as the guardian of its short-sightedly abandoned values.

Sub-narrative 3) Ungrateful Europe (historical arrogance and moral hypocrisy towards Russia)

“European civilization was actually saved by us, because the Tatar-Mongol yoke stopped at us... They put themselves in such an arrogant position towards us without any objective reasons.”⁷³

The sub-narrative of the ungrateful Europe paints Russia as the saviour of an ungrateful and arrogant Europe. It fuses mystic history with moral accounting, and pinpoints that Russia selflessly endured the suffering and protected Europe yet receives nothing in return but contempt. Wounded pride is palpable in these sentences, which is a key component of the Russian civilizational rhetoric.

Sub-narrative 4) The West is weak (economic, moral and political degeneration, chaos and dividedness)

“NATO has other problems. That's it, that's right, my dear, you have so many other problems. Here is to point out to you some of your problems. You've got BLM still in woke, right? The whole nation repents to the blacks who were once enslaved, then no longer enslaved, who have not been enslaved for 150 years, but they are repenting right now. Okay, that's your fashion there, they're always swinging from one thing to another. I don't even know why, probably because... They don't know how to drink, they start late and don't have time to learn. In their country, it is forbidden until the age of 21. [...] The Federal Reserve System of the United States of America — that is the very epicenter of the woes of the global economy. [...] When the American economy is collapsing and the US national debt

⁷³ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 13.07.2023, 00:10:12 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2647840>, accessed on 13.10.2025

is 34 trillion dollars or more, all eyes are once again turned to the Federal Reserve System. [...] This relates to the question of liberal democracies and how they usually end."⁷⁴

This sub-narrative blends mockery, moral critique and economic fatalism into a caricature of the West as a civilization in a terminal decay. It portrays the perceived Western weakness as total, irreversible and systemic, in a moral and cultural sense alike. Western societies are pictured as fragmented by “fashionable” ideologies (such as wokeism or the Black Lives Matter movement), unable to maintain moral coherence and hence, unfit to lead the world. Ridiculing the Western “repentance” and drinking habits acts as a cultural mirror which flatters Russian normality and maturity as opposed to its pitiful Western counterpart. The fusion of cultural mockery and economic fatalism predicts the inevitable downfall of liberal democracies and symbolically that of the dollar too. The West appears both as a hysterical and an exhausted civilization, which no longer believes in itself and is unable to resist all these destructive forces and ideologies. This narrative legitimizes Russian resistance by positioning the West as a decadent, self-destructive empire instead of a mighty adversary. Ridiculing it, hence, reassures the domestic audience that the conflict with the West is not dangerous, but morally safe and historically justified.

“The West’s hidden aggression”

Sub-narrative 1) Western companies are terrible

Sub-narrative 2) The West is Russophobic

This narrative frames the West as a malicious infiltrator, an actor that seeks to undermine Russia through economic control and coercion, cultural Russophobia and moral hypocrisy. This is not open warfare, but a perceivably hidden aggression which operates through media monopolies, corporate dependencies and cultural suppression towards Russia and Russians. The main function of the narrative is to legitimize the Russian leadership’s defensive authoritarianism, and argue why Russia must mobilize, nationalize and isolate itself to survive.

⁷⁴ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 12.04.2022, 00:23:14 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400470>, accessed on 13.10.2025

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Western states and corporations undermine Russia under the guise of globalization and liberal values.	“We allowed Google to become the main search engine in Russia... they surrendered, they have already given away this piece of land on the approach to Moscow for foreign military gas.”
Economic infiltration	Western companies act as covert agents of influence, using markets to weaken Russian sovereignty.	“Why don’t we just nationalize IKEA?... They behave like pigs, they violate all acceptable norms.”
Cultural aggression	The West wages a moral war on Russian culture, language, and identity.	“When someone tries to destroy Russian culture, it is an attempt at suicide.”
Russophobia as pathology	Western hatred of Russia is irrational, emotional, even physical — a civilizational sickness.	“She could not hear the words Russian... everything that concerned Russia evoked a scene close to anaphylactic shock.”
Moral inversion	Russia’s defensive actions are framed as moral necessity against Western hostility.	“You can kill a person, but you cannot kill the culture that he represents.”
Defensive mobilization	Calls for isolation, nationalization, and autarky are justified as protection from Western aggression.	“Does it violate their patents? We don’t give a damn about their patents.”
Moral conclusion	The West’s hidden aggression reveals its hypocrisy; Russia’s resistance affirms its moral and civilizational superiority.	“Our policy regarding the Russian language should be soft, natural... life will arrange everything in its place.”

Table 13. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) Western companies are terrible

“We allowed Google to become the main search engine in Russia, even though Yandex surpassed it significantly in terms of audience. Why did we allow it? Because we allowed its pre-installation on all devices imported into Russia. [...] Everything has already been done, they surrendered, they have already given away this piece of land on the approach to Moscow for foreign military gas. [...] I said, listen, why don’t we just nationalize Ikea? All these warehouses, all these stores, our people work there, they will now be left without jobs. Why? This is our

land, we let them in here. They behave like pigs, they violate all acceptable norms. [...] Are they assembling these cars here? Let them continue. Does it violate their patents? We don't give a damn about their patents."⁷⁵

Foreign corporations are presented as an extension of Western geopolitical aggression. Google, YouTube, and IKEA are not framed as businesses but as occupying powers, "foreign military gas" infiltrating Russian domestic space, as Margarita Simonyan words put it. This narrative turns economic dependency into territorial invasion, as if the land of Russia had been "given away". The proposed solution, which encompasses nationalization and ignoring patents showcases economic protectionism as patriotic resistance. According to this sub-narrative, Western aggression apart from military is infrastructural, which works through softwares, consumer culture and market capture. A further implication is that liberal globalization was the West's Trojan horse, and Russia's only safe and responsible response is claiming economic sovereignty through isolation and expropriation.

Sub-narrative 2) The West is Russophobic

*"As for the campaign to abolish Russian culture, we have talked and laughed a lot about it, and we have also spoken seriously. [...] When someone tries to destroy Russian culture, it is an attempt at suicide. Because they are destroying themselves. You can kill a person, but you cannot kill the culture that he represents. And it is definitely impossible to kill the culture of a whole nation, especially such a great nation as the Russian one."*⁷⁶

This sub-narrative incites fear based on the West wanting to abolish Russian culture. The "cancellation of Russian culture" symbolically proves the West's moral decay and cultural hatred. The narrative claims that Russophobia is not only unjust, but is also self-destructive, and can be considered as an act of civilizational suicide. The rhetorical inversion plays a key role. It denies Russian culpability, implicitly for the aggression

⁷⁵ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 04.12.2022, 00:23:11 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400470>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁷⁶ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov 05.07.2023 00:10:03 (Vladimir Putin), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2643560>, accessed on 14.10.2025

against Ukraine by reframing the West as the real aggressor who should be blamed. This West is an intolerant, hateful, but myopically self-cancelling entity. The narrative sacralizes Russian culture, and turns it into a moral fortress. The defence of Russian language and culture becomes equal to defending the nation itself. The narrative merges victimhood with moral superiority, according to which Russia suffers as the last guardian of true civilization.

“And Victoria, this is a historical fact, she was biting, as it is fashionable to say now, for the rest of her life. She could not hear the words Russian. She was so sick of the smell of cabbage soup that for weeks they could not put her in order. Everything that concerned Russia, the golden domes of churches, evoked a scene close to anaphylactic shock.”⁷⁷

The sub-narrative of the West’s hatred toward Russia which has deep, irrational roots is an important element of the “hidden Western aggression” strategic narrative. In this anecdotal image, where Queen Victoria allegedly, physically is disgusted by Russian culture shows Russophobia as a psychological pathology. The West is portrayed as irrationally, instinctively allergic to the existence of Russians, therefore it is not a strategic anti-Russianness. The grotesque imagery of an anaphylactic shock dramatizes Western irrationality, and shows the hatred towards Russia as an illness, or irrational hysteria. This, instead of a geopolitical antagonism, shifted the focus to a civilizational psychodrama, which serves to prove that the confrontation with the West is far from politics or rationality but is about identity.

The physically aggressive West

Sub-narrative 1) The warmongering West

Sub-narrative 2) The bloodthirsty Europeans

Sub-narrative 3) the West supports Nazis in Ukraine

According to this strategic narrative, the West is not a neutral or defensive actor, but an inherently aggressive, expansionist force that means a threat to Russia’s security,

⁷⁷ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov 21.07.2025, 00:33:02 (Margarita Simonyan), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2999686>, accessed on 14.10.2025

sovereignty and bare existence. Any Russian military action is framed as a necessary, morally right response to Western hostility. The narrative constructs a world where Western aggression is inevitable, and permanently present, but is morally indefensible, therefore, Russian military actions which are framed as defensive, righteous and historically justified, are legitimized.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Western governments, NATO, and Europe pursue anti-Russian policies and militarization.	“They’re preparing, they’re waiting for the right time,” “leading NATO countries make aggressive statements.”
Moral inversion	The West, not Russia, is the aggressor; Russia’s military actions are defensive.	“We are fighting for a peaceful life for Donbass citizens,” “They hide behind people to blame Russia.”
Existential threat	Western hostility threatens Russia’s survival and development.	“Russia cannot exist with a constant threat emanating from Ukraine,” “They also claim to possess nuclear weapons.”
Bloodthirsty Europe	European leaders are reckless, vain, and morally compromised.	“They have said and promised too much... impossible to back out without losing face.”
Support for fascists/neo-Nazis	The West arms and enables extremists in Ukraine to target Russia and Russian speakers.	“Leading NATO countries support extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis... on the recommendation of American advisers.”
Moral conclusion	Russia’s military actions are righteous, defensive, and historically justified.	“Our soldiers are fighting for Russia, for peace, for denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine.”

Table 14. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) The warmongering West

“The entire course of events and the analysis of incoming information shows that a clash between Russia and these forces is inevitable. It's only a matter of time. They're preparing, they're waiting for the right time.”⁷⁸

The sub-narrative of the warmongering West casts Western governments as the true aggressors, methodically and meticulously having prepared for a war against Russia. The

⁷⁸ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 24.02.2022, 00:14:29, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387090> accessed on 14.10.2025

painted “inevitable” clash neutralizes the conflict and removes any sense of Russian culpability of agency, presenting it as a historic necessity, or as a faith no one can go against. The use of pseudo-analytical language (“the analysis of incoming information” in the quotation) lends authority to a conspiratorial prophecy. The West’s support to Ukraine is framed not as defence but as a calculated provocation, underpinning that Russia’s actions are forced and solely reactive. The story itself transforms Russia’s invasion into an act of strategic pre-emption, proving that the West was already preparing for war, whereas Russia’s escalation is mere self-defence. The causal inversion solidifies the moral foundation of the narrative of an inherently warmongering West, against which Russia did only strike to prevent being struck first.

Sub-narrative 2) The bloodthirsty Europeans

As an interesting twist, a month after the presidential inauguration of Donald J. Trump (which took place on 20.01.2025), a new sub-narrative was launched (detected first in the observed talk shows on 19.02.2025), framing only Europe as a warmongering, bloodthirsty entity, as opposed to the logically acting and rational United States.

“Unlike the new president of the United States, the political leaders of European states are connected to the current regime, engaged. And they have said and promised too much. And now, excuse the simplicity of the expression, it is very difficult or practically impossible to back out of this position without losing face.”⁷⁹

According to this sub-narrative, Europe is depicted as morally corrupt and emotionally immature, driven by pride and the dependence on the “regime” in Kyiv. The use of words “connected” or “engaged” suggest moral captivity or addiction instead of principle or strategic alliances. European leaders are pictured as incapable of peace, as they are too heavily invested in hostility towards Russia, therefore, they would face humiliation if they even tried. This is why Europe’s stance is framed as neurotic, pride-driven and stubborn. The narrative transforms European diplomacy and geopolitics in general into a

⁷⁹ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 25.02.2025, 00:07:28 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-25-02-2025>, accessed on 14.10.2025

psychological flaw, showing Europe and European politics as petty and bloodthirsty fallen into the trap of their own rhetoric. Contrary to this, Russia positions itself as a rational and disciplined alternative.

Sub-narrative 3) the West supports Nazis in Ukraine

“Leading NATO countries support extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine... They hide behind people in the hope of blaming Russia for civilian casualties. It is reliably known that all this is happening on the recommendation of foreign consultants, primarily American advisers.”⁸⁰

Framing the West supporting Nazis in Ukraine fuses two powerful moral codes for Russians, anti-fascism and victimhood. The West, allegedly arming Nazis becomes guilty in fascism, which is a direct historical replay of the moral script of World War II or the Great Patriotic War. The mentioned “foreign consultants” motif portrays Western involvement as manipulative and hidden behind proxies, while actively taking part in the atrocities. Civilian suffering is reversed in this rhetoric, Western-backed Ukrainians cause it, while Russia only reacts from a victim position. This sub-narrative shows Russia’s war efforts as the replay of the Great Patriotic War, as an aggression against Russia, where it acts in defence of civilization itself. This sub-narrative ensures that Western accusations of war crimes could pre-emptively be dismissed as propaganda.

The hypocritical West

This strategic narrative constructs the West as a self-righteous, morally bankrupt actor that weaponizes double standards to justify its own dominance across the world. Western discourse on human rights, democracy and international law are all portrayed as cynical and performative, only a façade to conceal aggression, exploitation and ultimately, deceit. Russia’s position, contrasting this is always that of the morally consistent, transparent polar opposite. Double standards and moral hypocrisy are the backbone of this narrative, which is present permanently in the observed political talk shows.

⁸⁰ Channel-One, Time Will Tell, 25.02.2022, 00:01:40 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-25-02-2025>, accessed on 14.10.2025

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Western governments accuse Russia of aggression and moral transgression.	“Look at this hypocrite on CNN, BBC... would they tolerate this if it were British or American people?”
Exposure of double standards	The West applies human rights norms selectively, condemning Russia but excusing its own crimes.	“Have you ever been to Raqqa? There were corpses lying in ruins for months — no one cared.”
Structural deceit	Western diplomacy is built on broken promises and manipulation.	“They said not one inch east... they deceived us,” “They pat you on the shoulder, then do the opposite.”
Moral inversion	The West’s humanitarianism masks greed, power, and imperial ambition.	“Empire of lies,” “They provoke conflicts while preaching peace.”
Collapse of legitimacy	Western democracy and liberalism are revealed as corrupt, elitist, and intolerant.	“Without a billion you can’t think of elections,” “Democracy has degenerated into aggression toward alternatives.”
Moral conclusion	Russia’s truthfulness and consistency contrast with Western hypocrisy, legitimizing its defiance.	“We are not threatening anyone; they came to our borders,” “We act honestly, unlike them.”

Table 15. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

“In the 21st century, there have been 66 military conflicts... and in all of them, Western countries were involved in one way or another. But there was no such outcry. Until Syria! Why? Because we intervened in Syria... That’s what makes me sick of this hypocrisy.”⁸¹

The West’s moral selectivity is demonstrated in many ways, pinpointing that the civilian deaths caused by Western military forces in Raqqa or Afghanistan are allegedly ignored. The recently uncovered (8 days before the episode, on the 04.04.2022) Bucha massacre committed by Russians becomes a global scandal. Margarita Simonyan categorically denies that it was committed by Russia. Western humanitarianism is portrayed as false

⁸¹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 12.04.2022, 00:26:30 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400470> accessed on 14.10.2025

and hypocritical, theatrical without real substance which serves to hide geopolitical calculations. This narrative flips moral accusations into counteraccusations, where Russia is not a violator and the perpetrator of crimes but a mirror exposing the true face of the West.

“They told us in the 90s that not a single inch would go east. They deceived us. They just shamelessly lied. Five waves of NATO expansion.”⁸²

Hypocrisy is portrayed as a structural and constant feature of the West and Western diplomacy. Broken promises and manipulative politeness conceal crude interests. Democratic systems on the West are also painted as serving only as a façade.

“Jacques Chirac once told me: what democracy are we talking about? There, without a billion, if you don’t have billions in your pocket, you can’t even think of elections.”⁸³

The alleged deep-state, which is intertwined with corporate financing, controlled by the elite show that Western elections are hollow and rigged. This narrative inverts the moral hierarchy, where in the end the “free world” is not democratic, while Russia, which is an honest, transparent and socially cohesive state can proudly show its genuine democracy and sovereignty.

“Terrible Ukraine”

Sub-narrative 1) The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate

Sub-narrative 2) Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime

Sub-narrative 3) Ukraine is a terrorist state

This strategic narrative constructs Ukraine as a morally and politically corrupted entity instead of a legitimate state or the victim of aggression.⁸⁴ According to this narrative, it

⁸² Channel-One, Time Will Tell, 12.07.2024, 00:58:33 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-12-07-2024>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁸³ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 08.11.2024, 00:32:55, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2891124> accessed on 14.10.2025

⁸⁴ It is correct that the Constitution of Ukraine does not address the matter of postponing the presidential elections once the term of the incumbent expires. However, the Constitution addresses the same matter as

is a failed, illegitimate, terrorist regime ruled by Nazis. A moral inversion is palpable, as the Russian military aggression is transformed into a reluctant act of defence against chaos, and evil. The combination of delegitimization, and demonization which are present in this discourse, aim at dehumanizing Ukraine and portraying the Russian invasion as a rational and ethical choice which had to be made this way. According to this picture, Ukraine is a morally degraded, illegitimate and violent state which betrayed both its people and its history.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Ukraine is portrayed as a failed, violent, and morally bankrupt state.	“The Kiev regime is committing terrorist acts,” “They bomb civilians and destroy infrastructure.”
Delegitimization of leadership	The Ukrainian government is depicted as illegal, corrupt, and self-serving.	“The regime in Kiev has usurped power,” “Elections are cancelled because they would lose,” “They have no legitimacy.”
Pathologization of politics	Ukraine’s internal governance is framed as chaotic and self-destructive, with elites clinging to power.	“They prolong martial law to avoid elections,” “They are toxic for their own society and army.”
Moral corruption and terror	The Ukrainian state is equated with terrorism and moral decay.	“The Kiev regime commits terrorist acts,” “They deliberately target civilians,” “They are capable of any crime.”
Nazification trope	The government and armed forces are described as neo-Nazis oppressing their own people.	“Neo-Nazis have seized power in Kiev,” “They use civilians as human shields,” “They continue Hitler’s cause.”

far as the Verkhovna Rada when in Article 83, point 4, it states: "In the event that the term of authority of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine expires while martial law or a state of emergency is in effect, its authority is extended until the day of the first meeting of the first session of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, elected after the cancellation of martial law or of the state of emergency." In the absence of the extension of the President's office term, there are the following interpretations that are equally feasible: 1. As the constitution is mute on the matter, there is a loophole in the legislation. It can be filled from the analogous interpretation of the rule concerning the Verkhovna Rada cited above. 2. If one intends to put forward a more persuasive and concrete argument, it should look beyond the constitution. Ukrainian laws fill in the gap and provide guidance: "Law of Ukraine “On the Legal Regime of Martial Law” (2015) prohibits the holding of elections during martial law and the Electoral Code of Ukraine (2019) ordains suspension of all elections during such period. This is not an arbitrary political decision but a constitutionally viable solution aimed at ensuring stability in times of crisis. The law prevents governance from collapsing into uncertainty while the country is under extreme conditions." (See Oleksandr Vodiannikov, Ukraine's Constitutional Order in Wartime: Elections, Continuity and Legitimacy. *Verfassungsblog*, 10 February 2025 <https://verfassungsblog.de/ukraines-constitution-in-wartime/> Accessed: 27.02.2026)

Victim-blaming inversion	Ukrainian suffering is presented as self-inflicted, a consequence of its leaders' crimes and Western ties.	"This tragedy is happening because of their own mistakes," "They were deceived by the West and now pay the price."
Moral conclusion	Russia's war is framed as a humanitarian and de-Nazification mission to liberate Ukrainians.	"Our soldiers are freeing Ukraine from the Nazi junta," "We act to save the Ukrainian people from their corrupt rulers."

Table 16. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) The Ukrainian leadership is illegitimate

*"He is a factor of decay for both society and the state."*⁸⁵

Delegitimizing Zelensky is a repeatedly occurring sub-narrative during the examined period, which was especially amplified in February 2025, after Donald Trump seemed to accept the Russian rhetoric on Zelensky's illegitimate power and set the expectation to Ukraine for further support holding new elections. Delegitimization is a central element in this narrative. While the Ukrainian state is portrayed as a usurped structure that sustains itself using martial law as a pretext and Western manipulation. Zelensky's presidency and the entire Rada are presented as unconstitutional. The use of martial law as a pretext for not holding elections, paints the political leadership as pitiful, corrupt people, hungry for power even using illegitimate tools to hold it. The narrative depicts Ukraine as an authoritarian state, suffering under a corrupt regime.

Sub-narrative 2) Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime

*"The main clashes of the Russian army are not with regular units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, but with nationalist formations... Banderites and neo-Nazis... hide behind people in the hope of blaming Russia for civilian casualties."*⁸⁶

Portraying Ukraine as a country led by a Nazi regime is a central myth, and a key sub-narrative to the "terrible Ukraine" strategic narrative. It reactivates the emotional memory of the Great Patriotic War, which is central to Russian memory politics to this day, and

⁸⁵ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 25.02.2025, 00:56:48 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2938587>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁸⁶ Channel-One, Time Will Tell, 25.02.2022, 00:01:10 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-4-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-25-02-2022> accessed on 14.10.2025

which is celebrated and is a cornerstone of Russian national identity alike. This discourse fuses moral and historical time, as if the present war was the continuation of the one in 1941-1945. This narrative portrays Russia as the inheritor of the antifascist legacy, transforms Ukrainians who resist Russia into traitors. “Denazification” therefore, becomes a moral duty, not an act of conquest.

Sub-narrative 3) Ukraine is a terrorist state

“What happened is another terrorist act by the Kyiv regime. This is a senseless crime from a military point of view, having no significance, as the Crimean Bridge has long ceased to be used for military transportation. And it is cruel, as innocent civilians suffered and died.”⁸⁷

The Ukrainian leadership is also portrayed as an irrational, sadistic, terrorist leadership, targeting innocent civilians. The word “terrorist” erases the boundary between war and crime and suggests that Ukraine is not fighting a war but is committing crimes, only for the sake of doing it. This moral dehumanization gives legitimacy to Russia’s retaliation and frames that as justice rather than aggression and turns the battlefield and an invasion against a neighbouring country into a site of counterterrorism.

1) “The horrors of the Kyiv regime”

Sub-narrative 1) Bucha was a provocation

Sub-narrative 2) The Kakhovka dam was destroyed by Kyiv

Sub-narrative 3) The invasion was preceded by 8 years of genocide against Russian speakers

Although this strategic narrative fits in the narrative of “the terrible Ukraine”, in this section it is treated separately, as there are three distinct sub-narratives it builds on, which is referred to time to time by the Kremlin’s official rhetoric. Two of them frame war crimes committed by Russia as false flag operations, and provocations committed by Kyiv, and the third one uses an alleged genocide which was supposed to last for 8 years in Eastern Ukraine, systematically murdering Russian speaking people. The core of this

⁸⁷ Channel-One, Time Will Tell , 18.07.2023, 00:00:31, <https://www.ltv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-18-07-2023>, accessed on 14.10.2025

narrative is that Kyiv deliberately conducts atrocities and false-flag provocations against civilians. These acts reveal the moral depravities of the Ukrainian leadership, and justify the Russian intervention, framing it as protection, liberation or bringing justice. Simultaneously, this narrative delegitimizes Western outrage, labelling it hypocritical.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	Specific horrific incidents (Bucha, Kakhovka, repeated Donbass killings) are presented as facts demanding explanation.	“What happened in Bucha...”, “This sabotage... Kakhovka...”, “They subjected people to genocide for eight years.”
Interpretation / Reattribution	These incidents are reinterpreted as either provocations/false flags or deliberate terrorist acts by Kyiv (often aided by Western sponsors).	“Bucha is an operation under a false flag...”, “This sabotage... aims to deprive Crimea of water.”
Evidence claim	The speaker asserts possession (or forthcoming presentation) of <i>counter-evidence</i> to discredit external accounts.	“We have factual evidence that confirms this. We are planning to present it to the Security Council as soon as possible.”
Moral inversion	Alleged Ukrainian atrocities are used to invert perpetrator/victim roles: Kyiv (and the West) become the criminals; Russia becomes the defender.	“Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years.”
Historical anchoring	The narrative links present events to a prolonged history (8 years of Donbass violence) to justify escalation.	“It was a war right here... who had been exterminated for 8 years.”
Justification of intervention	Military action and exceptional measures are framed as necessary, proportionate, and humanitarian (rescue/justice).	“I have decided to conduct a special military operation... to protect people... and bring to justice those who committed bloody crimes.”
Epistemic effect	International condemnation is delegitimized as manipulation; audiences are urged to distrust external media and institutions.	“The international community is being deceived by the false narrative spread by Kiev and its Western sponsors.”
Moral conclusion	Russia’s actions are moral, defensive, and legally/ethically warranted; criticism of Russia is recast as political complicity.	“We act to stop genocide and to protect our people.”

Table 17. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) Bucha was a provocation

“What happened in Bucha is exactly an operation under a false flag by the Kiev regime and its Western sponsors. The possible goal of this provocation is horrifying and evokes nightmares of the crimes committed by the Nazis during World War II. We have factual evidence that confirms this. We are planning to present it to the Security Council as soon as possible so that the international community is not deceived by the false narrative spread by Kiev and its Western sponsors.”⁸⁸

The sub-narrative denying and reframing the independent accounts of the massacre and other atrocities committed by Russians in Bucha as a staged provocation. It discredits and delegitimizes eyewitnesses and forensic claims with a conspiratorial alternative, according to which it was the Ukrainian leadership supported by their Western sponsors who fabricated this story to manipulate the public opinion worldwide and stop the peace process. This narrative promises future evidence to refute the internationally accepted reading of what happened, and casts doubt on independent reporting and international institutions. The discursive function of this narrative is to pre-emptively neutralize accusations of Russia and create doubt in advance. Hence, if Bucha is staged, all allegations can be disregarded. Also, it shifts the blame onto Kyiv and its Western allies, and delegitimizes global responses too, suggesting that international condemnation is also part of the provocation.

Sub-narrative 2) The Kakhovka dam was destroyed by Kyiv

“This sabotage potentially can have very serious consequences for tens of thousands of residents of the region, ecological consequences. In addition, it is clear that this sabotage also aims to deprive Crimea of water. Apparently, this sabotage is also connected with the fact that two days ago massive offensive actions began... Yesterday, exactly the same countries and the same associations instantly accused our country of committing this terrorist attack... This is a crime

⁸⁸ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 05.04.2022, 00:41:32 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2398386>, accessed on 14.10.2025

that turns into information... It is impossible to qualify this otherwise than as acts of terrorism.”⁸⁹

This sub-narrative claims that the destruction of the Kakhovka dam was an intentional act of terrorism committed by Ukraine, which is meant to produce an ecological catastrophe and to be blamed on Russia. Also, it delegitimizes immediate Western accusations and places them in the story as part of the plot, part of the provocation against Russia. It shifts sympathy away from the victims of the flow towards scepticism of narratives that hold Russia responsible and further justify Russian retaliatory steps as pre-emptive measures and counterterrorism.

Sub-narrative 3) The full-scale invasion of 2022 was preceded by 8 years of genocide against Russian speakers

*“Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years. ... It was a war right here, with our Russian people, who had been exterminated for 8 years... I have decided to conduct a special military operation. Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years.”*⁹⁰

The narrative of 8 years of alleged Ukrainian genocide against Russian speakers was especially prevalent in the first months of the invasion but resurfaced later, on other occasions too. It constructs, along with the excerpt above, a long-term chronology of victimhood, where for eight years, the Donbass’ population suffered systematic violence and genocide. This narrative reframes the 2022 invasion as an overdue, necessary intervention to stop ongoing mass atrocities, and bring justice.

2) “The glorious Russian army”

Sub-narrative 1) Russia, the responsible military great power

Sub-narrative 2) The Russian army’s noble moral values

⁸⁹ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 06.06.2023, 00:10:49 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2628133> accessed on 14.10.2025

⁹⁰ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov ,24.02.2022, 00:01:01 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387299>, accessed on 14.10.2025

The Russian armed forces are a modern, responsible great power's military, that embodies prudence in terms of deterrence and preparedness and high moral standards, or even heroic self-sacrifice. The army protects the nation and behaves ethically, therefore, can be a source of national pride, states this narrative.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	External threats and rising geopolitical tensions justify vigilant strategic posture.	"Given the increase in geopolitical tensions... it is important to have modern and constantly ready-to-use strategic forces."
Professional readiness	Regular training and modernization demonstrate competence and control.	"Today we are conducting another training of strategic deterrence forces... the nuclear triad remains a reliable guarantee."
Responsible doctrine	Nuclear and force-use doctrines are presented as extreme, exceptional, and defensive.	"The use of nuclear weapons is an extreme and exceptional measure... we do not intend to get involved in a new arms race."
Moral comportment	The army behaves with honour: restraint toward civilians and respect for enemy combatants.	"Treat the Ukrainian military with respect... ensure them safe corridors so that they can join their families."
Heroic exemplars	Individual acts of courage and sacrifice are amplified to produce national pride.	"Our servicemen... sacrifice themselves... I have signed a decree posthumously awarding the title of Hero of Russia."
Moral & strategic conclusion	Military strength + moral conduct together legitimize state policy and present Russia as a responsible great power.	"The nuclear triad... a reliable guarantee of the sovereignty and security of our country... our soldiers act courageously and honourably."

Table 18. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) Russia, the responsible military great power

"Today we are conducting another training of strategic deterrence forces. We will practice the actions of officials in managing the use of nuclear weapons with practical launches of ballistic and cruise missiles. I would like to note that Russia confirms its principled position that the use of nuclear weapons is an extreme and exceptional measure to ensure the security of the state... the nuclear triad continues to remain a reliable guarantee of the sovereignty and security of our

country. ... We will continue to improve all their components. The resources for this are available.”⁹¹

The sub-narrative of the responsible military great power presents Russia as a sober, competent great power, a guardian of stability. It emphasizes the meticulous following of procedures, and discipline whether it is only about a regular training or about a doctrine. The forces are modernized, the necessary resources are available, everything is as it should be: these are the signals of responsible great power behaviour. Rhetorically it serves to reassure domestic audiences about national security, and it signals Russian capabilities and its ability to deter threats to foreign audiences. The narrative also legitimizes constant military modernization and readiness as rational statecraft, and frames nuclear capability as a stabilizing force rather than an aggressive, threatening one. It turns investment in arms into a moral duty for the protection of sovereignty and global peace and balance.

Sub-narrative 2) The Russian army’s noble moral values

*“Our servicemen are fighting steadfastly, with a full understanding of the righteousness of their cause. Even after being wounded, soldiers and officers remain in formation. They sacrifice themselves, their lives, to save their comrades-in-arms and civilians...I have signed a decree posthumously awarding the title of Hero of Russia to Senior Lieutenant Nurmagomed Engelsovich Gadzhimagomedov.”*⁹²

and

*“I really liked Shoygu's words... he ordered our military to treat the Ukrainian military with respect... if they want to lay down their weapons and leave, ... ensure them safe corridors so that they can join their families.”*⁹³

⁹¹ Rossiya-1, 60 Minutes, 29.10.2024, 00:04:29 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2886776>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁹² Rossiya-1, 03.03.2022 Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 03.03.2022, 01:50:34, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2389201>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁹³ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 24.02.2022, 00:16:33 <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387299>, accessed on 14.10.2025

The combination of hero-making with appeals to military honour and humane conduct towards prisoners and other combatants are at the core of this sub-narrative, according to which the Russian army embodies noble moral values. The sub-narrative frames restraint, discipline and the respect of oath as uniquely Russian military virtues. This sub-narrative builds emotional attachment to the army, and gives it moral legitimacy, it is framed as effective and morally superior. Hero stories humanize costs, justify all sacrifices made, and present violence as only a small part of what is happening on the frontline. It serves to strengthen domestic support for the war, and international criticism less credible and easier to disregard for domestic audiences.

“Russia’s noble deeds and intentions”

Sub-narrative 1) Russia only defends itself

Sub-narrative 2) Russia only strives for peace

Sub-narrative 3) Russia is the saviour of people in Ukraine

According to this strategic narrative, Russia’s intentions are noble, and rational, it acts not out of conquest or aggression but fuelled by moral necessity and a sober need for self-defence. Its aggression against Ukraine is portrayed as a humanitarian, defensive and peace-oriented mission, which is aimed at saving lives, protecting the vulnerable people and creating peace.

Stage	Narrative Function	Typical Discursive Move
Trigger	A humanitarian and security crisis in Donbass and Ukraine demands immediate action.	“Circumstances require us to act decisively and immediately. The People’s Republics of Donbass appealed to Russia for help.”
Moral imperative	Russia cannot stand idle in the face of suffering and genocide; intervention is a moral duty.	“It was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare, the genocide against millions of people living there.”
Humanitarian justification	Russian action is portrayed as saving innocent civilians from atrocities.	“The Gorlovka Madonna... killed by the Ukrainian army... we had to stop this horror.”
Self-defence framing	The operation is a necessary and reluctant measure to protect Russia’s security.	“We have been left with no other opportunity to protect Russia and our people.”

Peace-seeking posture	Russia alone pursues negotiations and settlement while others sabotage peace.	“Russia advocates for a complete and final resolution of the conflict... our positions on possible peaceful settlement were presented.”
Moral and political conclusion	Russian actions are inherently defensive, humanitarian, and peace-oriented; they prove Russia’s moral integrity and historical righteousness.	“We do not intend to impose anything on anyone by force... our actions are self-defence against the threats posed to us.”

Table 19. Narrative stages and discursive moves of the narrative.

Sub-narrative 1) Russia only defends itself

“(...) I have decided to conduct a special military operation. Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years... It was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare, the genocide against millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, hope only on you and me.”⁹⁴

The sub-narrative of Russia, the saviour or the people in Ukraine positions Russia as a rescuer, which is compelled to act in the defence of helpless, long-suffering civilians. The accusations of the alleged genocide and personal stories of suffering constitute a moral emergency, which legitimizes Russia’s intervention as an act of compassion and historical responsibility.

Sub-narrative 2) Russia only strives for peace

“Russia cannot feel safe, develop, or exist with a constant threat emanating from the territory of modern Ukraine... We have simply been left with no other opportunity to protect Russia and our people, except for the one that we will have to use today.”⁹⁵

Russia according to the sub-narrative of “Russia only defends itself” exercises only its right to self-defence, picturing itself as a besieged fortress. The West and the “Kyiv regime” are described as aggressors, which threaten Russia’s bare existence, therefore, to

⁹⁴ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 24.02.2022, 00:01:12, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387299>, accessed on 14.10.2025

⁹⁵ Ibid. 00:00:44

convey a pre-emptive attack is also understood as an act of self-defence. The key word is necessity, as it frames the invasion as a forced prevention instead of Russian expansionism.

Sub-narrative 3) Russia is the saviour of people in Ukraine

“Our positions on possible peaceful settlement were presented... of course, I am ready to discuss the nuances of this kind.”⁹⁶

The sub-narrative according to which Russia only strives for peace portrays Russia as the only sincere peace-seeker among many countries, who each have their own (better or worse hidden) interests in continuing the war. Military actions are framed as only temporary means to a peaceful ending, whereas the West and its puppet Ukraine are portrayed as obstructing negotiations and the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Russia’s diplomacy is showcased as constructive, of high morals and of strong principles. The fact that it “offers peace” even while in fight, shows its moral superiority to the target audience.

4.2.4 The results of the robustness check

A purposive subsample of the textual corpus was taken, and the coding was conducted without using the codebook. From the 144 page-long cleaned and filtered corpus, which contains exclusively the quotations of the Kremlin’s identified talking heads, a sample of 15 pages was taken, with multiple speakers in various communicative situations. For the sample and the full table of examples see ANNEX VI.

The dominant patterns are clearly visible in open coding too. There is a strong narrative alignment found, with regards to Russia presenting itself as only responding to Western provocation; the West being portrayed as aggressive; Western actors showcased as economically vulnerable; and Ukraine is represented as strategically aggressive. This means, that the central narrative structure was reproduced rather clearly by the robustness check. Examples for the positive alignment can be seen in Table 20 below.

⁹⁶ Channel-1, Time Will Tell, 04.07.2024, 01:27:26 <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-04-07-2024> accessed on 14.10.2025

Quotation	Open coding	Official codebook equivalent	Relationship
"Its goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years... bringing to justice those who have committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians."	Ukraine depicted as perpetrator of genocide and violence	Cases for Ukraine's terror reign	Direct alignment
"The leading NATO countries support extreme nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine... [who] kill... defenseless people... Hitler's accomplices."	Ukraine as Nazi/violent; Western support for Ukrainian extremists	Cases for Ukraine's terror reign; West supports Nazis in Ukraine	Direct alignment
"Our actions are self-defense against the threats posed to us and against an even greater disaster."	Russian military action framed as necessary self-defense	Russia's noble deeds and intentions	Direct alignment
"The main clashes of the Russian army... are not with regular units... but with nationalist formations... directly responsible for the genocide in Donbass and the blood of civilians."	Ukrainian nationalists portrayed as genocidal perpetrators	Cases for Ukraine's terror reign; Dangerous Ukrainians	Direct alignment

Table 20. Examples for positive alignment from the robustness check.

Partial alignment was found in certain cases, as the examples in Table 21 below demonstrate. These show that the official codebook captures the central narrative function of many passages but does not necessarily reveals all the nuances and dimensions of them. In these cases, there is an added dimension, not fully covered by the codebook.

Quotation	Open coding	Official codebook equivalent	Relationship
"Russia remains part of the global economy... our partners should... work in solidarity with the government in search of tools that would support production, the economy, and jobs."	Russia as constructive international economic partner	Russia's noble deeds and intentions	Partial alignment / codebook gap; cooperative economic positioning is broader than the current definition
"There is no question here about macroeconomic stability... the macroeconomic indicators are actually better than expected."	Russian economic resilience/stability	none	Non-alignment; no code captures Russian economic resilience or domestic stability
"Russia will only move forward, and in its own way, without isolating itself from anyone."	Russian sovereignty and resilience; rejection of Western isolation	none	Non-alignment; sovereignty/resilience is not represented in the codebook
"Dependence in this sphere means serious threats to national security, weakening, or even loss of the country's sovereignty."	Technological sovereignty; resistance to external dependency	none	Non-alignment; no existing code captures technological/economic sovereignty
"We have learned lessons and drawn the necessary conclusions."	Russia learning from Western pressure; national self-reliance	none	Non-alignment; resilience/self-reliance falls outside the current codebook
"The Secretary-General and the staff of the United Nations... sincerely strive to fulfill the corresponding conditions... But they cannot do anything because Western countries do not intend to fulfill these promises."	UN portrayed as well-intentioned but constrained by the West	General hypocrisy	Partial alignment / codebook gap; this distinguishes between Western obstruction and relatively sympathetic UN actors, which the existing Western categories do not capture
"We can suspend our participation in this deal... if the promises... are fulfilled, we will immediately join this deal again."	Russia as conditional but pragmatic negotiator	Russia's noble deeds and intentions	Partial alignment / codebook gap; the existing code captures peaceful intentions but not pragmatic conditional cooperation
"Ukraine, of course, has the right to ensure its security... there is only one limitation... threats should not be created for another country."	Russia acknowledging Ukraine's sovereign security rights while imposing reciprocal security principles	none	Non-alignment; neither Russian benevolence nor Western aggression fully captures this sovereignty/reciprocity argument
"We are not against discussing such issues... with the mandatory condition of ensuring the security of the Russian Federation."	Russia portrayed as willing to negotiate under reciprocal security conditions	Russia's noble deeds and intentions	Partial alignment / codebook gap; negotiation is captured, but reciprocal-security logic is not
"We gave every chance for this deal to work and did everything necessary for its implementation from our side."	Russia portrayed as cooperative and reasonable in diplomacy	deeds and intentions	Partial alignment; fits the broader narrative, but diplomatic reasonableness is not explicitly defined

Table 21. Examples for partial alignment from the robustness check.

The independent coding identified discursive elements which were not covered by the original codebook. For instance, Russian sovereignty, resilience, economic stability and technological self-reliance do not fit under the existing codes of the codebook. These cases, shown in Table 22 below, do not necessarily constitute counter-narratives, but they have to be recognised as uncaptured discursive elements, or non-alignment with the existing codebook and coding.

Quotation	Open coding	Official codebook equivalent	Relationship
"Russia will only move forward, and in its own way, without isolating itself from anyone."	Russian sovereignty and resilience; rejection of Western isolation	none	Non-alignment; sovereignty/resilience is not represented in the codebook
"Dependence in this sphere means serious threats to national security, weakening, or even loss of the country's sovereignty."	Technological sovereignty; resistance to external dependency	none	Non-alignment; no existing code captures technological/economic
"We have learned lessons and drawn the necessary conclusions."	Russia learning from Western pressure; national self-reliance	none	Non-alignment; resilience/self-reliance falls outside the current
"Ukraine, of course, has the right to ensure its security... there is only one limitation... threats should not be created for another country."	Russia acknowledging Ukraine's sovereign security rights while imposing reciprocal security principles	none	Non-alignment; neither Russian benevolence nor Western aggression fully captures this

Table 22. Examples for non-alignment from the robustness check.

Overall, the robustness check has demonstrated that the codebook is more suitable for capturing the negative representations of Ukraine and the West, than it is at capturing the positive one of Russia as a sovereign, resilient, pragmatic and self-reliant actor. This hiatus for the future could potentially be bridged by introducing a "Russia is sovereign and resilient" code into the codebook.

4.2.5 Conclusion to the results of the second research question

The Kremlin's strategic narratives in the observed period (24 February 2022-24 August 2025) were reconstructed according to the appearances of Maria Zakharova, Margarita Simonyan, Dmitry Peskov and Vladimir Putin in the three talk shows (Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 60 Minutes and Time Will Tell) on the examined 114 days. Conducting an indicative thematic coding and the observation of repeatedly occurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the narratives were reconstructed (Riessman, 2008). The following table shows the coding hierarchy, and the number of references.

Narratives			Number of references
Terrible Ukraine			94
	Cases for Ukraine's terror reign		25
		Bucha was a false flag	5
		Kakhovka was Ukrainian ecoterrorism	6
		8 years of genocide	14
	Terrible Ukraine		69
		Illegitimate Kyiv leadership	16
		Terrorist Ukraine, killing peaceful civilians	19
		Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime	34
Glorious Russia			125
	The glorious Russian army		37
		Responsible military great power Russia	9
		The Russian army's noble moral values	28
	Russia's noble deeds and intentions		88
		Russia only defends itself	23
		Russia seeks for peace	24
		Russia the saviour of people in Ukraine	41
Anti-Western narratives			191
	The pitiful West		7
		Western weapons sent to Ukraine end up in bad hands	1
		Culturally decaying West	2
		Ungrateful Europe	2
		West is weak	2
	Hypocritical West		88
	The West's hidden aggression		11
		Western companies are terrible	5
		The West is Russophobic	6
	Physically aggressive West		96
		Bloodthirsty Europeans	8
		The West supports Nazis in Ukraine	19
		Warmongering West	69
	Western sanctions are bad		25
		Sanctions are bad for the world	6
		Sanctions are ineffective or ridiculous	19

Table 20. The Kremlin's strategic narratives identified in the observed period. The parent codes contain the aggregates of their child codes.

Using the thematic codes, the following nine strategic narratives were reconstructed (set with bold letters, below each, the sub-narratives constituting it). Out of the nine strategic narratives, the first five can be considered anti-Western, two anti-Ukrainian and two glorifying Russia's intentions, deeds and the Russian army. On the following chart the identified strategic narratives and the sub-narratives which constitute them are illustrated.

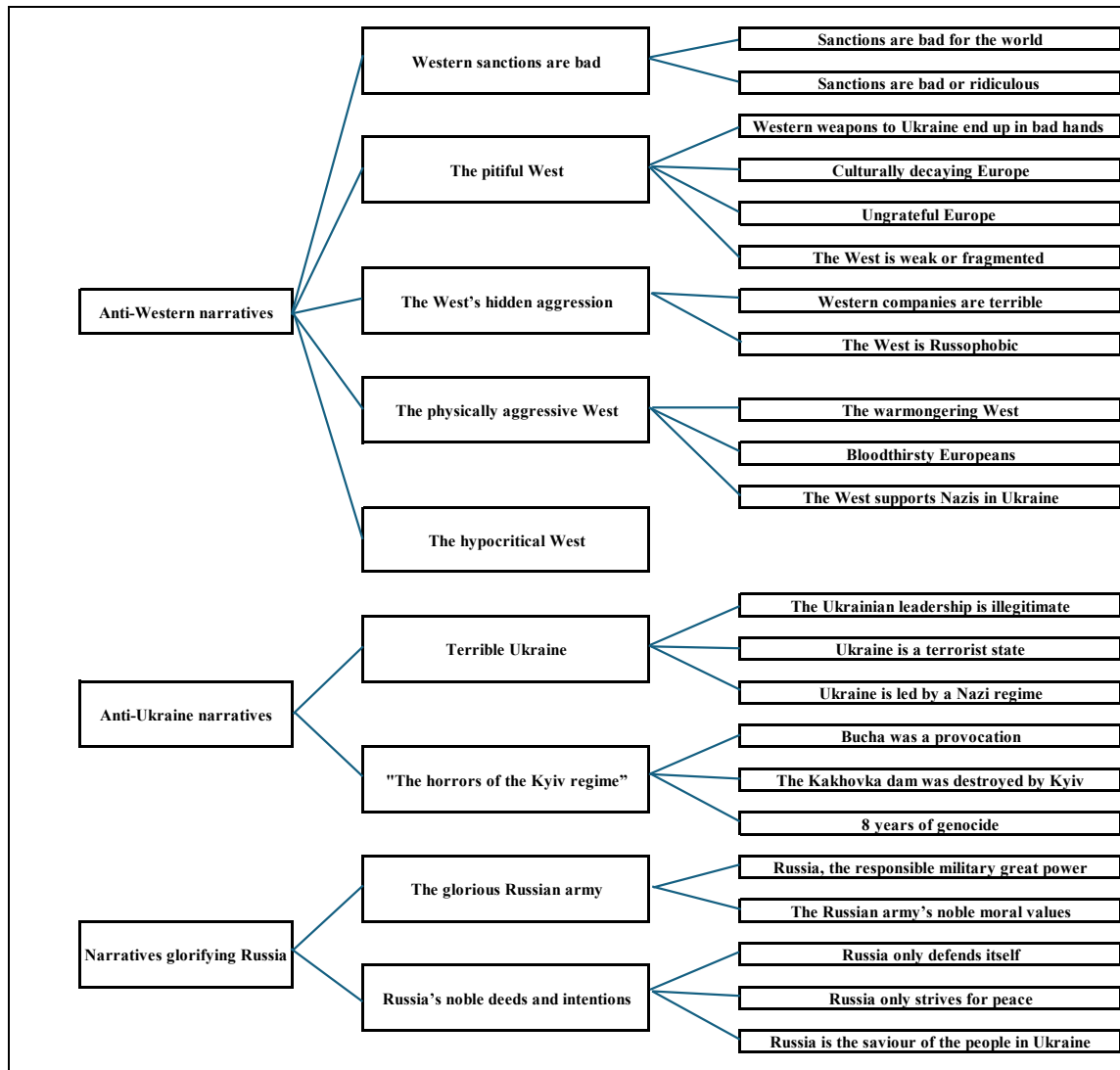


Figure 4. The reconstructed narratives and the sub-narratives constituting them.

4.2.6 The narratives the identified Western experts used

To examine to what extent, and in which ways do the identified Western experts use the Kremlin's strategic narratives, the textual corpus of the chosen talk shows on the observed 114 days was taken, which was filtered to the identified speakers. The thematic coding was conducted according to the codebook created for the reconstruction of the Kremlin's strategic narratives, discussed in the previous section. The codebook was further expanded with identified sub-categories identified during the coding process. Based on the thematic codes, the narratives used by the identified foreign experts were reconstructed the same way as in the case of the Kremlin's official talking heads and compared to those.

“Horrors of the Kyiv regime”

Sub-narrative 1) The Kakhovka dam was destroyed by Ukrainians

Sub-narrative 2) Bucha was a Ukrainian false flag operation

Sub-narrative 3) Eight years of Ukrainian genocide against Russian speakers

Just like in the Kremlin’s identified strategic narrative, Ukraine is portrayed as a morally bankrupt, violent state, which wages a war not only against Russians, but against its own people and the truth itself. Its malicious actions, which cover a wide spectrum of evil deeds, from genocide to false flag operations and the deliberate destruction of infrastructure and the nature demonstrate Ukraine’s inhumanity and illegitimacy. This framing shows the Russian intervention as a civilizational necessity to stop Ukrainian terror and the West’s complicity alike.

This narrative was less often used by the identified Western experts than by the Kremlin’s official talking heads.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
"Horrors of the Kyiv regime"	25	10
Bucha was a false flag	5	3
Kakhovka was Ukrainian ecoterrorism	6	4
8 years of genocide	14	3

Table 21. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) The Kakhovka dam was destroyed by Ukrainians

“Having created some kind of provocation, NATO was actually deceived that it was done by Russia, but it is funny and ridiculous.”⁹⁷

The sub-narrative according to which the Kakhovka dam and the subsequent ecological catastrophe was a Ukrainian false flag operation showcases the destruction of the Kakhovka dam as a Ukrainian provocation aimed at harming civilians and manipulating the global popular opinion, turning them against Russia by the images of the ecological

⁹⁷ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 04.07.2023, 01:53:08 (Michael Bohm) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-vypusk-ot-04-07-2022>, accessed on 22.10.2025

disaster. The event is framed as an integral part of Ukraine's "terrorist" strategy, sacrificing even its own infrastructure to falsely blame the damage on Russia.

Sub-narrative 2) Bucha was a Ukrainian false flag operation

*"And this provocation in Kramatorsk and the provocation in Bucha. (...) They know this very well because they can lie on any TV channel, but there are experts there."*⁹⁸

Similarly, Bucha, which is one of the key atrocities recognized internationally as a Russian war crime is reframed as a provocation, carried out by Ukraine to misleadingly manipulate Western popular opinion and turn it against Russia. This sub-narrative was used multiple times after the Russian attack against the railway station in Kramatorsk, filled with civilians who were trying to run away from the city under shelling. The Western experts referring to Bucha, treat it as a symbol of Western information warfare against Russia, which also suggests that the West uses such "provocations" as a last resort. This sub-narrative transforms evidence of Russia's brutality into a proof of how much the West is in despair, also, the claim that the West would lie in its media discredits such outlets in the eyes of Russian viewers in advance:

*"It seems to me that for the West this is a crucial battle. This is their last chance to regain the initiative. And they will throw everything they have. But if they start using such a provocation now, it means that they will really lose, and they know it."*⁹⁹

Sub-narrative 3) Eight years of Ukrainian genocide against Russian speakers

The sub-narrative of eight years of Ukrainian genocide which preceded and made the Russian full-scale invasion a moral necessity and an act of liberation from Nazi rule establishes the foundational myth of Ukrainian cruelty and collective guilt. This narrative

⁹⁸ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.04.2022, 01:25:32 (Xavier Moreau) <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400092>, accessed on 22.10.2025

⁹⁹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 05.04.2022, 01:18:48 (Xavier Moreau), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2398430>, accessed on 22.10.2025

can also implicitly blame ordinary Russian citizens of being for the lack of compassion and the media which did not pay enough attention to the suffering of the people in Donbas during the whole time.

“I am grateful to Rodion, who reminded me how it all started. Because now many people are starting to forget. And yet the L.N.R., D.N.R. were under the threat of destruction. And they were ready for this sprint. And to do it preventively and go further, that's what saves you. We always forget to talk about this. We get into geopolitics, discussing Nazis, discussing information space. We need to remember all the time. It's painful. Do you understand? Because if not us, then they. And they are the only ones who understand. No one else. And you can't understand it in the studio. But you need to be there, in this pain, inside. You need to be in the DNR, LNR, and then you understand why everything is happening.”¹⁰⁰

“Terrible Ukraine”

Sub-narrative 1) Illegitimate Kyiv leadership

Sub-narrative 2) Terrorist Ukraine, killing peaceful civilians

Sub-narrative 3) Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime

in addition:

Sub-narrative 4) Corruption and lawlessness in Ukraine

Sub-narrative 5) Propaganda in Ukraine

Sub-narrative 6) Historically terrible Ukraine

Sub-narrative 7) Terrible refugees from Ukraine

Sub-narrative 8) Ukrainian politicians

Sub-narrative 9) Zelensky

The strategic narrative on the terrible Ukraine reconstructed from the Kremlin’s talking head constituted of three sub-narratives. These framed the Ukrainian leadership as an illegitimate, Nazi regime or military junta, which leads a terrorist state that kills peaceful civilians in Russia and at home, alike. These three narratives were used by the identified

¹⁰⁰ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.03.2022, 00:29:56 (Vladimir Sergienko) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-01-03-2022>, accessed on 22.10.2025

Western experts too, however, less frequently than the official talking heads of the Kremlin. The additional sub-narratives identified, which the Western experts used, however, fit perfectly in the “terrible Ukraine” strategic narrative. Comparing the overall number of references within this strategic narrative used by the Kremlin’s official talking heads and the Western experts, they are almost equal.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
Terrible Ukraine	69	65
Illegitimate Kyiv leadership	16	11
Terrorist Ukraine, killing peaceful civilians	19	5
Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime	34	12
Corruption and lawlessness in Ukraine		7
Propaganda in Ukraine		6
Historically terrible Ukraine		3
Terrible refugees from Ukraine		2
Ukrainian politicians		3
Zelensky		16
Zelensky is a weak, talentless leader		1
Zelensky is a stupid puppet, controlled by warmongering Europeans		9
Zelensky would soon be dismissed		6

Table 22. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Illegitimate Kyiv leadership

The strategic narrative of the terrible Ukraine portrays Ukraine as a failed, criminal, inhuman state, a country ruled by illegitimate leaders who follow a terrorist logic and who are infected by Nazi ideology. This narrative erases Ukraine’s moral and political sovereignty and showcases Russia as the only actor that is capable to restore the order. The first three sub-narratives constituting it, echo the Kremlin’s official talking points. First, framing the Ukrainian leadership as an illegitimate one, denies the existence of legitimate political authority in the country.

“With whom? I ask again, I ask as a counter-question, who to talk to in Ukraine?”

It feels like... Actually, we don't have anyone to talk to at all."¹⁰¹

The questioning of legitimacy was present from the beginning of the examined period, later slightly shifted in focus to denying the president's legitimate rule referring to the lack of elections which cannot be held due to the martial law, therefore, he exploits his power at the expense of the Verkhovna Rada. Framing the postponing of elections as Volodimir Zelensky's petty game aimed exclusively to stay in power, suggesting that Ukrainians despise him so much that he would not be re-elected by any chance started in February 2025. The first time when this sub-narrative was used by a Western expert in the examined period was on 25 February 2025 by Vladimir Sergienko,¹⁰² while first time by a Kremlin official, Vladimir Putin, it was already used on 5 July 2024.¹⁰³

Sub-narrative 2) Ukraine is led by a Nazi regime

Portraying Ukraine as a Nazi state, or an illegal military junta is another related sub-narrative. The "Nazi Ukraine" trope creates the war's key moral justification, especially for Russian domestic audiences that have a historic and emotional connection to the World War II.

*"And so, the denazification, which was carried out in Germany and Ukraine, will have to be carried out to the roots. Burning it to the roots. Otherwise, it will be reborn."*¹⁰⁴

This sub-narrative reframes the invasion as a liberation campaign, and strengthens other related narratives, which justify Russia's invasion, such as the ones detailing the

¹⁰¹ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 25.02.2022, 01:14:09 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-25-02-2022>, accessed on 22.10.2025

¹⁰² Channel One, Time Will Tell, 25.02.2025, 01:46:06 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-25-02-2025>, accessed on 22.10.2025

¹⁰³ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 05.07.2024, 00:22:42 (Vladimir Putin), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-vypusk-ot-05-07-2024>, accessed on 22.10.2025

¹⁰⁴ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 28.02.2022, 01:11:05 (Yakov Kedmi), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2388251>, accessed on 22.10.2025

sufferings of people in Eastern Ukraine during the alleged genocide of eight years, detailed among others in the strategic narrative of “the horrors of the Kyiv regime”.

Sub-narrative 3) Terrorist Ukraine, killing peaceful civilians

Another sub-narrative, which similarly aims at creating the perception of the invasion as moral duty is framing Ukraine as a terrorist state. Ukraine depicted as a rogue state, which exploits and endangers its own civilian population. A remarkable difference compared to the Kremlin’s strategic narratives’ framing, where Ukraine is a terrorist state which commits terroristic attacks against innocent Russian civilians, Western experts in the examined period did not explicitly define Ukraine as a terrorist state for this reason. In their reasoning Ukraine was a terrorist state for taking its own people hostage:

“The Ukrainians behave just like the terrorists did. They hold the population hostage.”¹⁰⁵

In addition, Ukrainians were depicted as terrorists as a threat to international security, for which end, Alaska seems to be a safe choice for the summit of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in August 2025:

“As we know, Ukrainian terrorism is the most terrible threat to all of humanity. Not only to Russia, but to all of humanity. I believe that if there was this summit in the Middle East, discussing Dubai and Rome then, there are many Ukrainian terrorists there. Ukrainian terrorist groups, they are involved in the Middle East and in Europe, of course. Alaska is also a place where there are no Ukrainian groups.”¹⁰⁶

Sub-narrative 4) Corruption and lawlessness in Ukraine

The sub-narrative which frames Ukraine as a corrupt and chaotic place without rules, law and order reduces Ukraine’s political life to a spectacle of corruption and criminal self-

¹⁰⁵ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 02.03.2022, 00:45:42 (Yakov Kedmi), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2388885>, accessed on 22.10.2025

¹⁰⁶ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 13.08.2025, 01:52:03 (John Varoli) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-13-08-2025>, accessed on 22.10.2025

interest. This is reinforced by references to widespread oligarchic schemes, and movie-like pictures such as “suitcases of money”, which along with Western complicity construct the image of Ukraine as a moral vacuum, unworthy of empathy or solidarity. The speakers repeatedly claim that “nothing ever changes”, corruption and lawlessness was always present and so is it to be and is often paired with claims denying Ukraine’s sovereignty.

“Ukraine has a huge number of problems. Huge. This includes corruption and a little interference from special operations.”¹⁰⁷

Sub-narrative 5) Historically terrible Ukraine

Another sub-narrative used by Western experts, pinpoints at how Ukraine is not only a terrible place now, but how it has been during history. They strengthen the image of a currently terrible and uncivilized Ukraine by creating the historic continuum, where the fact that the country was in many aspects, inferior to Russia and then to the Soviet Union. Extrapolating the listed negatives, the audience sees that the situation is bad there with a good reason, and if there is no intervention from Russia which serves noble goals, the future looks equally dim. Historical determinism delegitimizes Ukrainian statehood altogether. This narrative, which fuels the feelings of despise, moral and cultural superiority amongst Russian audiences.

“Ukraine has never been a state. The Soviet Union made Ukraine a state. It didn’t just make Ukraine a state. The Soviet Union created a developed economic state, giving it genuinely Russian territories. It created a magnificent industry, the second most important in the Soviet Union, a strong scientific base, achieving what had never been before. Ukraine was not only a recognized state within the Soviet Union, it became a member of the United Nations. Thanks to the Soviet Union. And now Ukraine had a chance, the only chance in history, to become a

¹⁰⁷ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 04.07.2022, 00:43:42 (Michael Bohm) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-vypusk-ot-04-07-2022>, accessed on 23.10.2025

truly independent normal state and develop on the basis of what the Soviet Union gave it, what Russia gave it, its state. Everything ended in complete collapse.”¹⁰⁸

This narrative, which incorporates the element on the ungratefulness of Ukrainians, fuels the feelings of despise, moral and cultural superiority amongst Russian audiences. In a patronizing way, it calls for Russia’s intervention as part of a civilising mission.

Sub-narrative 6) Propaganda in Ukraine

*“It means that there is a very strong propaganda machine in Ukraine. I constantly compare it to the Goebbels machine.”*¹⁰⁹

The sub-narrative about how strong and monstrous Ukrainian propaganda is, and how similar it is to the Nazi one of Göbbels, demonizes not only the Ukrainian government, but its entire civil sphere and media. All of these, along with rescuers, humanitarian aid workers and their messaging is reframed as a simple, cynical manipulation of the information space, supervised by the West. This shifts the weight of moral burden away from Russia to Ukraine that wants to deceit and use victims for propagandistic reasons.

Sub-narrative 7) Terrible refugees from Ukraine

Denying victimhood is a key element of the sub-narrative which describes Ukrainian refugees in Germany opportunists as well.

*“Because if it's a prosperous region like Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg, where they have their own money in addition to federal funds, that's where the main flow of Ukrainian refugees was directed, the attitude towards them has become more negative. Because they realized that most of these people have no connection to the affected regions and are just opportunists.”*¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.07.2023, 01.09.28 (Yakov Kedmi) <https://smotrim.ru/video/2646558>, accessed on 23.10.2025

¹⁰⁹ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.03.2022, 00:07:45 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-01-03-2022>, accessed on 23.10.2025

¹¹⁰ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 03.07.2024, 01:20:40 (Gregor Spitzen), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-03-07-2024>, accessed on 23.10.2025

The image of “fake refugees” serves to delegitimize the suffering of Ukrainians, and undermine European solidarity. The claim that refugees only want to exploit the Western welfare systems, the discourse merges anti-Ukrainian and anti-migrant rhetorical elements. Depicting Ukrainians abroad as unworthy of help, seeking to exploit welfare systems reinforces the imagery that “Ukraine” exports corruption and deceit wherever it goes.

Sub-narrative 8) Ukrainian politicians

As another recurring sub-narrative of “the terrible Ukraine” describes how bad Ukrainian politicians are. They are showcased as rude, arrogant people who practise “uncensored behaviour”, which implies that the Ukrainian political elites are uncivilized and unfit for diplomacy. It is put in a sharp contrast to Russia’s dignified leadership, and its bearers as highly educated, professional, well-mannered people. For instance, linguistic vulgarity can be framed as a sign of political illegitimacy, as in the following case:

“In Ukraine today, swearing is considered normal at press conferences of their president or former president Zelensky.”¹¹¹

Sub-narrative 9) Zelensky

The sub-narratives of how Zelensky is unfit for leadership form another category. While occasionally he is also called by name by the Kremlin’s official talking heads, it happens significantly more often by Western experts. In the examined period, in the observed political talk shows, the Kremlin officials pronounced his name only 24 times, while Western experts did so 156 times. There are three recursive sub-narratives about Zelensky. According to the first, he is a weak, ungifted leader, who is clumsy and intellectually unfit for leadership.

¹¹¹ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 28.07.2025, 01:28:00 (Vladimir Sergienko) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-28-07-2025>, accessed on 23.10.2025

*“He is really like an elephant in a china shop.”*¹¹²

He is portrayed as unable to manage or navigate in international diplomacy, and lacking self-awareness. Ridiculing him undermines his personal authority in the eyes of Russian domestic audiences and presents him as an embarrassment to Ukraine and its allies, or as someone who is more of a liability instead of an asset. The second sub-narrative builds on this perceived clumsiness and ungiftedness, and frames Zelensky as an empty vessel, a manipulated figure whose “curators” in Europe or the US. control his decisions. The recurring imagery of “assigned advisors”, “owners” and “curators” erases his agency, and showcases Ukraine as a colonial proxy state, as a tool in the hands of the West. The repeated juxtaposition between the “childish” Zelensky and his “adult” Western masters further reinforces the subordination and hierarchy.

*“It's hard with Zelensky. Because, let's say, he's a simple example. Give a math problem from the tenth grade to a third grader, he won't be able to solve it. Give a diploma thesis from a higher educational institution to a tenth grader, he won't understand anything either. You see, Zelensky is not capable of comprehending the level of things happening in the country. In terms of the volume of information, he simply cannot process it. Neither in geopolitics nor in anything else. That's why, of course, advisors were assigned to him who clearly control his thought processes.”*¹¹³

Building on the above mentioned two, the third sub-narrative described that the West is palpably dissatisfied with Zelensky, and as their employers, the political end is near for him and would soon be dismissed. The end of his political career is portrayed both as deserved and inevitable. Amongst the identified Western experts, this sub-narrative was first used by Georg Spitzen, on 01.08.2025:

¹¹² Channel One, Time Will Tell, 07.03.2025, 01:44:05 (Michael Bohm) <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-07-03-2025>, accessed on 23.10.2025

¹¹³ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 02.03.2022, 00:25:24 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-4-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-02-03-2022>, accessed on 23.10.2025

“There is strong dissatisfaction with Zelensky, and after all the negativity that was poured out from the pages of German and European press on Zelensky, I highly doubt that they are betting on him.”¹¹⁴

Interestingly, this sub-narrative did not occur immediately when the draft bill was accepted on bringing NABU and SAPO under the control of the prosecutor general on 23 July 2025, which bore immediate and negative reactions from the European Union and the Ukrainian society alike, but only on the first of August, on the exact day, when the problem was already solved, and Zelensky signed a law restoring the independence of the two authorities.

The West is hypocritical

Sub-narrative 1) General Western hypocrisy

Sub-narrative 2) The West does not care about Ukraine

Sub-narrative 3) The West is Nazi

Sub-narrative 4) The West sends only outdated weapons

Sub-narrative 5) Western media is bad

This narrative portrays the West as a morally corrupt and deceitful, selfish entity, and seeks to undermine Western authority by uncovering the contradictions between its actions, “imperialist” and “criminal” behaviour, and its proclaimed liberal, democratic values. While the Kremlin’s reconstructed, strategic narratives “Western hypocrisy” is used as a universal explanation, and a universal criticism against the West. It has blurred meaning, and although sometimes in these narratives, Western institutions are named, often, it is the general Western political elites, and the “collective West” is understood, without even specifying which countries or continent(s) are to be blamed specifically. “The hypocritical West” is a universal and often referred-to scapegoat. As opposed to this, Western expert characters pay special attention to the hypocritical, biased nature of Western media, as a proof of Western hypocrisy as a whole. Besides this, there are four

¹¹⁴ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.08.2025, 01:54:04 (Gregor Spitzen), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-01-08-2025>, accessed on 23.10.2025

sub-narratives, which are pronounced by these expert figures, which underpin the Kremlin’s strategic narrative about the “hypocritical West”.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
Hypocritical West	88	67
General Western hypocrisy	87	14
The West does not care about Ukraine		9
The West is Nazi		14
The West sends outdated weapons		4
Western media is bad	1	26

Table 23. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) General Western hypocrisy

“These elections, it's a show for fools. The people don't decide anything. It's Soros, it's Obama, it's Hillary, it's Bill Gates. They are all puppeteers. And in 2016, it was disproven. Because if Trump, as a person who is clearly against hysteria, how did he win, where is this deep state? Everything convinced us.”¹¹⁵

The sub-narrative of general hypocrisy often frames Western democracies as fraudulent performances secretly directed and manipulated by hidden elites. In the excerpt, for instance, the 2016 Trump victory is presented as a brief rupture in this, which supposedly revealed the existence of the “deep state”. By discrediting Western democratic institutions for being corrupted and manipulated, this sub-narrative weakens Western claims to moral and political superiority, and Western criticism regarding Russia’s authoritarian political developments. Western democracy, hence, becomes a spectacle of hypocrisy in the eyes of Russian domestic audiences and not a model to follow.

¹¹⁵ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 06.11.2024, 01:24:38 (Michael Bohm), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-06-11-2024>, accessed on 24.10.2025

Sub-narrative 2) The West does not care about Ukraine

“Ukraine has been forgotten, like a bad dream. And the focus is on China and Iran.”¹¹⁶

The West’s support to Ukraine is portrayed as opportunism and as a way to get rid of outdated and disposable weaponry, hence, as a mere tactical move in a wider geopolitical game, disguised as sincere help and compassion. Shall Ukraine use its strategic utility for the West. It is abandoned. This sub-narrative delegitimizes both Ukraine’s alliance with the West and Western humanitarian rhetoric, while it presents Russia as a more sincere actor, who consistently pursues its aims.

Sub-narrative 3) The West is Nazi

“This is a technology for dehumanization. And let me remind you that I had access to German archival documents, where every seizure of real estate, objects, at that time it was called geschäft objects, that is, business production, from a bakery to a shoe production workshop, was always accompanied by a court decision with a swastika, they acted according to the law. And the Jews, when they took the blows, this dehumanization, there were three steps. The first step was dehumanization. The second step was the seizure of real estate. The third step is the industrial destruction of an entire nationality, religion, and race. And what I see today, I see the transition from the first step to the second step, when they simply take away something, as if by law, again, business, something else. I think the situation is not just alarming, the situation is very dangerous.”¹¹⁷

The sub-narrative portraying Western countries, particularly Germany as Nazis fuses historical revisionism with moral accusation. According to it, Russians living in these countries are the new Jews, who suffer from various kinds of disenfranchisements, simply

¹¹⁶ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.11.2024. 01:51:25 (Michael Bohm) <https://www.ltv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-02-11-2024>, accessed on 24.10.2025

¹¹⁷ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 04.03.2022 01:08:20 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.ltv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-04-03-2022>, accessed on 24.10.2025

for the fact that they are Russians and they are treated as inferior. This narrative is predominantly used by the four identified Western experts of Russian origin, with German affiliation. The narrative accuses Western nations with being the real heirs of Nazi ideology. Connecting the fascism of WWII to modern, Western policies creates historic continuity and interprets anti-Russian sentiment as a continuation of historic Russophobia, which is equated to what happened to Europe's Jewish population. This, contrasted to Western liberal rhetoric, is the core of this sub-narrative, which is part of the "hypocritical West" strategic narrative.

Sub-narrative 4) The West sends only outdated weapons

*"The engines are very weak. They will send all of this to Ukraine. And how will it help them? How will they train people? Train a proper infantry platoon? My experience is at least 3 months, and being a tanker is even more. That's why I think Russia can win this war in a couple of months."*¹¹⁸

Western military aid is depicted as cynical, hollow and useless. It is showcased as a façade of solidarity, which hides solely self-interest. As the West supplies Ukraine with outdated weapons, these countries can appear moral and empathic, while they dispose of their military junk. This sub-narrative reinforces the key message of the West being hypocritical.

Sub-narrative 5) Western media is bad

*"They only hear what they want. Iron Curtain? Absolutely an iron curtain. And in its worst manifestation, coloured in LGBT colours. That is, it's an iron curtain, a very special one, in which completely different people will be in charge of this iron curtain."*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.04.2022, 01:27:35 (Xavier Moreau) <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400092>, accessed on 24.10.2025

¹¹⁹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 25.02.2022 (Alexandr Sosnovsky), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387643>, accessed on 24.10.2025

Western experts often refer to Western media as biased, unjust and deeply hypocritical, as part of the “hypocritical West” strategic narrative. Several of them being presented as journalists affiliated with a Western country clearly adds credibility to their claims, as they are positioned as people who possess deep knowledge of how the Western media operates. The way they show Western media is unanimously negative, as repressive, that censors and ideologically captures. In the excerpt, the speaker fuses two symbolic tropes, the Cold War-style suppression of dissent as opposed to the claimed freedom of press, and moral decadence. He accuses the West of silencing alternative voices, persecuting pro-Russian commentators, and promoting the distorted liberal dogmas of the decaying West. This sub-narrative delegitimizes Western outlets and any information to be found in them and legitimizes Russian state-controlled media as the only truthful alternative.

The pitiful West

Sub-narrative 1) Western weapons sent to Ukraine end up in bad hands

Sub-narrative 2) Culturally decaying West

Sub-narrative 3) Ungrateful Europe

Sub-narrative 4) The West is weak, fragmented or in an economic decay

The “pitiful West” strategic narrative shows the West, and in particular, Europe, as a morally exhausted, culturally degenerate and incompetent entity. Unlike the “hypocritical West” narrative, which exposes the Western deceitful intentions and showcases it as a mighty actor, this one emphasizes decay, weakness and decline. From the four identified narratives, identified from the Kremlin’s official talking heads, the “ungrateful Europe” was not used by Western experts in the examined period. Even the other three were rarely used by the Kremlin’s identified officials, or by the Western experts. Where the most significant difference is seen, is the “West is weak, fragmented or in an economic decay” narrative, which is heavily used by Western experts (90 times in the examined period, as opposed to 2 by the Kremlin’s official speakers). It consists of 5 identified sub-narratives. The references add up, and the conclusion can be drawn that Western experts often ridicule and belittle the West, significantly more than the Kremlin’s official speakers do. This shows that one of their key functions is to amplify this anti-Western narrative, to

which the fact that they are highlighted to be associated with a Western country, lends an additional credibility in the eyes of Russian domestic audiences.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
The pitiful West	7	93
Western weapons sent to Ukraine end up in bad hands	1	2
Culturally decaying West	2	1
Ungrateful Europe	2	0
West is weak, fragmented or in an economic decay	2	90
General weakness	2	70
Europe puts to danger its own population		7
Ridiculous Europe		9
Trump is clueless about the world		1
Western armies are useless		3

Table 24. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Western weapons sent to Ukraine end up in bad hands

“You know, I can say for sure, German Nazis may come, but it's unlikely that PMCs from Britain will. But the scariest thing is... In Germany, for example, suddenly there appeared, in Britain suddenly there woke up applicants from the First Chechen War, who enjoyed political asylum, avoiding punishment, avoiding search by the Russian Federation. So, living, let's say, a normal life in Europe, now they have announced that they are ready to go to Ukraine with their Muslim brothers from the East. God forbid. God forbid. (...) I understand it well. Because they will arm themselves there, and then they will return to Europe.”¹²⁰

This sub-narrative shows the West as reckless and incompetent, particularly Western leaderships which unleash chaos by sending weapons to Ukraine, which would return to

¹²⁰ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 01.03.2022, 01:35:02 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2388544>, accessed on 27.10.2025

Europe like a boomerang. Europe is portrayed not as a calculating hegemon, or a mighty entity that deceitfully seeks to undermine and destroy Russia, but as a myopic and confused one, which sabotages itself.

Sub-narrative 2) Culturally decaying West

“And unfortunately, our future civilization, the European civilization, will not be playing in France, but will be playing in Ukraine. I really hope that Russia will win because it's the real Europe against the West.”¹²¹

This sub-narrative redefines Europe as Russia itself, while the West is portrayed as a civilization in an irreversible decay, spiritually hollow, way beyond its pinnacle. Russia is showcased as the true heir of European civilization including classical literature and Christianity, while Europe represents decadence and nihilism. The formerly present respect towards Europe is replaced with pity.

Sub-narrative 3) Ungrateful Europe

This narrative was not used by Western experts in the examined period.

Sub-narrative 4) The West is weak, fragmented or in an economic decay

This narrative portrays the collective West as internally exhausted, militarily impotent, politically divided and morally lost. The image shows confused, self-defeating countries in Europe, sometimes shown as exploited and colonized by the United States, sometimes as endlessly and fruitlessly fighting with each other over unimportant issues. This dysfunctional group is not terrifying and is not a potent challenger to Russia. The disorganized entity consists of economically weak countries, the societies of which are on the brink of collapse and can certainly not endure the hardships the forecasted direct or indirect consequences of the Western sanctions would bring upon them.

¹²¹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.04.2022, 01:34:54 (Xavier Moreau), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400092>, accessed on 27.10.2025

*“The Euro is not the dollar, Europe cannot borrow like the US, there are no such resources as in the US. There are no such resources, that's the answer. And there are no such financial and military resources, that's why they are now trying, they are trying in panic.”*¹²²

The lack of resilience to hardships of Western societies is emphasized by the prognosed protests following the increase of prices, which would swipe away “pro-war” European governments, leading to the termination of Western support to Ukraine in the end.

*“Because people are tired, after a month people are tired, I mean the French, tired of this war. Tired that gasoline costs 2.5 euros per liter. When the yellow vests started, it was 1.6. They understand that everything will become more expensive, both grain and fertilizers for our farmers. After the embargo against Belarusian fertilizers, the cost of fertilizers has already increased once, twice, three times.”*¹²³

The EU is also depicted as a highly non-functional, entity, which is unable to make decisions and is on the brink of collapse, hence, the more resilient Russia only has to patiently wait until it falls apart to free from the sanctions altogether.

*“(...) all EU countries need to decide together. But in five months from now, there will either be an extension or no extension of the sanctions. So, in any case, we have 5 months to... If there will be European Union. If,...yes. If there will be European Union.”*¹²⁴

This dysfunctionality is further amplified by Europe putting its own population at risk by assisting Ukraine. Apart from the above detailed sub-narrative of Western weapons ending up in wrong hands, this category shows a wider spectrum of dangers lurking at European citizens by the fault of their short-sighted political elites. The dangers range

¹²² Channel One, Time Will Tell, 18.02.2025, 01:11:07 (Michael Bohm), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-18-02-2025>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹²³ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 05.04.2022, 01:19:54 (Xavier Moreau), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2398430>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹²⁴ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.04.2022, 01:26:23 (Xavier Moreau), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2400092>, accessed on 27.10.2025

from potential terror attacks to uncontrolled migration and the return of armed radicals; hence, the dystopic pictures show that the naïve European governments transfer war and chaos onto their own countries by supporting Ukraine. The weakness of the West here does not only lie in arms, but in a moral confusion and the loss of self-preservation instinct, and moral degeneracy:

“Well, this is a clownery. I'm shocked about what they showed, especially about these. This is a clownery, it's really, well, it's villainy and clownery, because trouble has come to every civilian home. And you know, about these bearded men. And Russia has experience in fighting terrorism not only in Syria, but also on its own territory. Accordingly, that iron shield that will stand, the terrorists will come running, boom! And armed ones are already returning to Europe.”¹²⁵

European leaders endanger their populations in a short-sighted way, while Western armies in general are portrayed as weak and useless, especially against Russia if the confrontation became open, as Western experts claim. Especially the French Xavier Moreau amplifies this, who, as a man with military experience in the French army, is positioned as a credible source of information about Western armies for Russian audiences. He lives up to the role exclusively criticizes Western armies:

“ (...) no one can resist the Russian army now. And even take the French armies, which are one of the largest in Europe, it's about 226,000. So, it's not even worth mentioning. And I say that the total army of ground forces should be 130,000. And plus, I know because I served with them.”¹²⁶

Europe is depicted as a ridiculous entity, with incompetent and absurd, self-absorbed leaders which deserve to be laughed at. Also, there is a palpable *Schadenfreude* expressed over the perception that Europe lost its former status to the United States.

¹²⁵ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 02.03.2022, 00:27:33 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-4-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-02-03-2022>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹²⁶ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 12.11.2024, 01:14:50 (Xavier Moreau), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2893303>, accessed on 27.10.2025

*“I imagine a typical circle, fresh alcoholics come in, say, I'm an alcoholic, call me Joe. And they all say, hi, Joe. I imagine the same circle of politicians. They say, I'm a crazy Russophobe, call me Emmanuel. Hi, Emmanuel. I'm a crazy Russophobe, Ursula von der Leyen.”*¹²⁷

This excerpt, for instance, shows key European leaders as participants of a psychotherapy session, where they confess about the reason of their irrational behaviour, which here is called Russophobia. Portraying them as hysterical and incompetent, reducing the EU diplomacy to a collective neurosis and a comic stage allows Russian viewers to feel superior, and this feeling to replace fear with ridiculing this unserious team. This is a key rhetorical move to diminish Western authority in the viewers' eyes. The above-mentioned sub-narratives were specifically ridiculing Europe, not the US, or if less specifically, then ridiculing the collective West. However, there was an instance, when Trump personally was depicted as a clueless amateur who does not even know his own interests, a few days before the Trump-Putin meeting in Alaska:

*“ (...) it seems to me, Trump does not always realize the economic advantages or, conversely, the economic losses of the United States of America. And when he says, 'let's see what Putin says', in fact, he is waiting for an analytical note that will state what is good for America and what is bad for America.”*¹²⁸

The hidden aggression of the West

Sub-narrative 1) Western companies are terrible

Sub-narrative 2) The West is Russophobic

Sub-narrative 3) Arrogant, money-hungry USA

This strategic narrative presents the West, the United States and its allies deceptively violent and predatory. Unlike open military aggression, the West's dominance-seeking is

¹²⁷ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 19.08.2025, 01:05:40 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-19-08-2025>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹²⁸ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 08.08.2025, 00:06:52 (Vladimir Sergienko),

<https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-08-08-2025>, accessed on 27.10.2025

masked behind democracy, economic aid and cultural influence, this is why it is understood as a hidden aggression. It operates through coercion disguised as partnership, colonization as globalization and Russophobia as moral virtue. This narrative seeks to convince Russian audiences that Western gestures, even though they might seem harmless, conceal deeper and bad intentions, such as the humiliation, weakening and exploitation of Russia.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
The West's hidden aggression	11	42
Western companies are terrible	5	
The West is Russophobic	6	19
Arrogant, arbitrary, money-hungry USA		23

Table 25. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Western companies are terrible

This sub-narrative was not traced during the examined period.

Sub-narrative 2) The West is Russophobic

The accusation of being Russophobic predominantly relates to Europe, although not exclusively, but speakers with German affiliation such as Vladimir Sergienko and Alexandr Sosnovsky use it the most. Russophobia is framed as the emotional expression of Western hostility, a kind of soft violence against Russian people and Russian identity itself.

“Someone has to do the work of protecting those Russians who may stutter, mumble with an accent in Austria, but they are Russian, they want to help somehow, they don't know how to do it. They are afraid now. Everyone is afraid now. And at that moment, you know, I don't know, maybe Rossotrudnichestvo will launch some new programme. Here we need not just brainstorming, we need to do something, just something. Are they bullying a girl? Do you think adults are

not being bullied now? It's just a disaster. And this bullying, which is being tolerated, and I believe that the bullying started not with Schulz's speech in the Bundestag, but with Merkel when she said that there should be no more people in our country who understand Russians, Russenschweine. And from that moment on, the legalization of bullying began."¹²⁹

Emotionally engaging stories, such as bullied schoolchildren, confiscated cars and cancelled concerts build the image of Europe as a repressive, neo-Nazi civilization, where waging a mental war against Russians is the new norm. The portrayal of everyday discrimination as a systemic and exclusively ideology-driven process, this narrative suggests culture in the West became weaponized, and an extension of the war on the battlefield. The aggression in this case is hidden, and masked as democracy and tolerance, while it bears exclusion and humiliation for Russian speakers.

Sub-narrative 3) Arrogant, money-hungry USA

This sub-narrative frames the United States as an arrogant, money-hungry actor, which dominates and rules over its allies in Europe as well, along with being the global hegemon pursuing its goals with harsh tools worldwide. It has been recurring during the entire observed period, first used by the American journalist Michael Bohm on 30.06.2022,¹³⁰ the frequency of the use of this narrative grew significantly in February 2025, when the US first tried to coerce the Ukrainians into a rare earth mineral agreement. Interestingly, the Western experts approve the arrogance and arbitrariness of the United States and adhere to the hyper realist worldview these political talk shows often transmit. Still, the U.S. is showcased as a power which rules over its allies with fearmongering and coercion:

“on Hamburg, the Americans practiced dropping a nuclear bomb with German hands, with German pilots, with German aircraft. If we translate it into another normal language, then the economy is wonderful, the dollar is wonderful, there is only one but. Tell me another state where they are practicing a drop on a

¹²⁹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 01.03.2022, 01:34:02 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2388544>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹³⁰ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 30.06.2022, 01:01:09 (Michael Bohm), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-25-02-2025>, accessed on 27.10.2025

millionaire city, then they are practicing the same thing on Leipzig, with American weapons. Any normal German understands that as long as the American base is there, they will be obedient.”¹³¹

The United States is painted as a cynical empire driven by domination and greed, hiding its aggression behind economic and military dependence. Europe can only be a vassal, and the victim of American exploitation. The American dominance within NATO is translated as a symptom of the American colonial mindset, which seeks to economically deplete Europe.

Physically aggressive West

Sub-narrative 1) Bloodthirsty Europeans

Sub-narrative 2) The West supports Nazis in Ukraine

Sub-narrative 3) War-mongering West

This strategic narrative depicts the West not just as morally corrupt or hypocritical as described earlier, but as an immediate military threat to Russia’s physical existence. According to this narrative, Western countries actively wage a war against Russia through weapons, proxy armies with existing long-term plans of Russia’s destruction. Both Europe and NATO are pictured as a resurgent militarist bloc, fuelled by historical revanchism and Russophobia. While the “Warmongering West” includes Europe as well, specifically accusing Europe from the West to accuse with seeking war, and being the key “pro-war force” exists separately as well (used from the beginning of the observed period). What was not detected from the three identified Kremlin sub-narratives in the speeches of Western experts, was “The West supports Nazis.” This one exactly was not used, however, a tougher accusation, according to which the West itself is Nazi, was used 14 times, as described under the strategic narrative of “the hypocritical West.” The overall goal of this strategic narrative which paints the West as the ultimate warmonger which poses an inevitable risk to Russia’s safety, security and future is mobilization at home,

¹³¹ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 25.02.2025, 00:59:12 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-vypusk-ot-25-02-2025>, accessed on 27.10.2025

and the justification of Russia's own military escalation, as it is framed as a necessary act of self-defence against an inevitable Western attack.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
Physically aggressive West	96	85
Bloodthirsty Europeans	8	17
The West supports Nazis in Ukraine	19	0
Warmongering West	69	68

Table 26. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Bloodthirsty Europeans

“There can be no compromise about anything. Because it's either them or you. As long as Europe is like this, as long as Europe is practically waging war on your destruction.”¹³²

Europe is shown as collectively possessed by an irrational hatred of Russia, driven by envy and revanchism. The voiced Western experts (predominantly Vladimir Sergienko, Yakov Kedmi and Alexandr Sosnovsky) describe key European countries like France and Germany as not merely complicit, but eager participants in a war of extermination against Russia, where Ukraine is only a tool in their hands. This imagery aims to revoke historic memories of fascism in Russian audiences. This sub-narrative merges historical trauma related to WWII and Nazi Germany with contemporary geopolitics and creates a continuous line of permanent Western aggression. Depicting Europe as a key enabler of the war, or even as the one to blame for Ukraine's prolonged war efforts puts the responsibility of the war in Ukraine to Europe.

Sub-narrative 2) The West supports Nazis in Ukraine

As mentioned above, the Western experts did not use this sub-narrative but referred to the West itself as Nazi 14 times.

¹³² Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 01.03.2022, 01:10:07 (Yakov Kedmi), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2388544>, accessed on 27.10.2025

Sub-narrative 3) War-mongering West

“Any NATO soldier today, entering a Ukrainian barracks, knows with their eyes closed where the weapons will be, where the body armour will be, where the helmet will be. So it was all already prepared.”¹³³

This sub-narrative frames the collective West as a threat of looming aggression lurking at Russia. According to it, NATO has long prepared Ukraine as a launchpad for a war against Russia. The West in this narrative cynically sacrificed Ukraine to pursue its own, selfish goals, and aims at prolonging the war as long as possible. Western experts often draw parallels with the “Cuban missile crisis 2.0”,¹³⁴ and frame NATO summits as a next step towards an open war, with hints that “plans for war with Russia are being approved”¹³⁵ in Vilnius, which is NATO’s collective suicide.”¹³⁶ all these reinforce the sense of an impending world-war provoked by Western obsession with domination and power. European countries such as Germany, Britain and Poland (being on the same side, now) are depicted as dangerous zealots, reviving 1940, with war plans to conquer Moscow.

Western sanctions are bad

Sub-narrative 1) Sanctions are bad for the world

Sub-narrative 2) Sanctions are ineffective or ridiculous

Sub-narrative 3) Sanctions are immoral against long-suffered Russians

This strategic narrative depicts Western sanctions against Russia as irrational, self-harming, cruel and as a sign of imperial arrogance. It presents Russia as the moral center of the suffering world, which is unjustly punished, but heroically enduring. The sanctions

¹³³ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 24.02.2022, 00:35:24 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-vypusk-ot-24-02-2022>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹³⁴ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 28.02.2022, 00:12:04 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-4-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-28-02-2022>, accessed on 27.10.2025

¹³⁵ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 11.07.2023, 01:13:50 (Yakov Kedmi), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2646558>, accessed on 28.10.2025

¹³⁶ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 22.06.2022, 00:38:14 (Alexandr Sosnovsky), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2430992>, accessed on 27.10.2025

serve to picture the West as incompetent and hypocritical, as the sanctions would backfire, and Russia as morally superior that can stand tall even under unjust circumstances. Similarly to the Kremlin's official talking heads, Western experts used this narrative mostly at the beginning of the full-scale invasion, but it recurred later as well.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
Western sanctions are bad	25	14
Sanctions are bad for the world	6	1
Sanctions are ineffective or ridiculous	19	12
Sanctions are immoral against long-suffered Russians		1

Table 27. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Sanctions are bad for the world

“For the whole world, exactly. And this will just contribute to the pressure for you to understand that you are doing something wrong.”¹³⁷

Sanctions according to the Kremlin's narrative are framed as an unjust Western policy, which is going to have a boomerang effect, and devastate the Global South besides hurting Europe itself. While the Kremlin's talking head used this narrative multiple times to pinpoint Western hypocrisy and fake position as sensitive to humanitarian issues while actively creating them. This discursive move universalizes the suffering of Russia and turns it into a worldwide suffering. This way, criticizing the sanctions can be reframed from fighting against national isolation into a fight for global solidarity. Western experts did only refer to this once.

Sub-narrative 2) Sanctions are ineffective or ridiculous

“But based on this, one can make, in general, such a small conclusion that if sanctions are imposed, then Germany will not withstand the pressure of these sanctions on itself for more than 90 days, not on Russia. (...) Well, it's summer,

¹³⁷ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 28.06.2022, 00:27:30, (Jiři Just)

too, so they can still endure somehow. Based on this, experts already say that probably Germany expects that by the end of the year this sanction pressure will be lifted."¹³⁸

This sub-narrative turns sanctions into a sign of Western, and predominantly European comedy of incompetence. Western experts, especially the ones affiliated with Germany Alexandr Sosnovsky and Vladimir Sergienko gleefully calculate how long Germany or France would “survive their own sanctions”, assuming that the sanctions would do more harm to Europe than to Russia. They portray the West as an economically irrational actor, which “shoots itself in the foot.” Ridiculing the incompetent West and presenting Russia as a large and self-sufficient, resilient country which cannot be damaged by such unserious sanctions serves to help the psychological coping to the audiences, transforming this punishment and the potential difficulties caused by it into a symbolic, moral victory over the West.

Sub-narrative 3) Sanctions are immoral against long-suffered Russians

“(…) one person, is Margarita Simonyan, an Armenian, whose grandmother was a victim of genocide a hundred years ago. The second person is Vladimir Solovyov, a Jew, whose half family died in World War II, including at the hands of Ukrainian collaborators and Nazis. And I have a question, how do you justify imposing such sanctions, including against such people, and then they start interrupting me."¹³⁹

This sub-narrative was absent from the Kremlin’s toolkit but was used by the speaker associated with Germany Alexandr Sosnovsky, the day after Margarita Simonyan, the editor-in-chief of RT was sanctioned. He framed the sanctions as immoral to use against people whose ancestors did undergo terrible things in the past. This narrative fits in the Kremlin’s rhetoric schemes of Russophobia, where the underlying strategy is to reframe any criticism or step of the adversary not as a punishment for certain deeds, but a baseless

¹³⁸ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 24.02.2022, 01:16:10 (Alexandr Sosnovsky), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387299>, accessed on 28.10.2025

¹³⁹ Rossiya-1, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, 25.02.2022, 01:08:12 (Alexandr Sosnovsky), <https://smotrim.ru/video/2387643>, accessed on 28.10.2025

personal attack for who the person is. Sanctions here are portrayed and dramatized as a deeply inhuman persecution which targets an innocent, historically traumatized person, suggesting that any Russian could come next. The speaker also equates the sanctions with collective punishment, a reminiscent of genocide and antisemitism. This sub-narrative transforms political accountability into moral martyrdom, and invites the Russian audiences to feel outrage and compassion instead of debating the legality of the sanctions or what they were taken as a response to by Western countries.

The glorious Russian army

Sub-narrative 1) Responsible military great power Russia

Sub-narrative 2) The Russian army's noble moral values

This strategic narrative constructs the Russian army as a moral, highly disciplined and responsible force, which is a legitimate heir to the Soviet mythology of victory and a legitimate source of national pride. It is positioned as the polar opposite of immoral forces of Ukraine which commit immoral acts and war crimes. The narrative idealizes Russian military conduct and intentions and conceals the brutal nature and illegality of the invasion by creating a cult of heroes. It serves to reinforce patriotic pride and the sentiment of moral exceptionalism, and at the same time to neutralize accusations of war crimes. While this strategic narrative was often used by the Kremlin's official talking heads, comparatively, it was less used by Western experts, as the following table shows.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
The glorious Russian army	37	12
Responsible military great power Russia	9	4
The Russian army's noble moral values	28	8

Table 28. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Responsible military great power Russia

“I believe that what the Russian army is doing now is insanely important in the context of even those provocations, so that the Russian soldier is, as always, a Russian soldier. Because they are now shoved into the hands of the Ukrainian genocide, a nuclear power plant, they will now shove a lot of things into his hands. It's not about the correctness of the case, it's an insane responsibility. You see, minimizing civilian casualties is a very important thing now.”¹⁴⁰

The Russian military is depicted as a trustworthy and reliable actor, that acts out of necessity and responsibility, and refrains from unnecessary aggression. Its actions are shown as stabilizing measures in a chaotic, brutal world, aimed at minimizing civilian harm and preventing terrorism. This sub-narrative moralizes the military action by highlighting technical precision, restraint and responsibility, and concealing the brutality of the war. The Russian army is a rational and humane actor, a mighty military great power which is in a sharp contrast with Western irrational and irresponsible steps, and the immoral actions of Ukraine.

Sub-narrative 2) The Russian army's noble moral values

“No one is going to rape, no one is going to kill civilians.”¹⁴¹

The Russian army's restraint and humanity are positioned here as clear evidence of moral superiority. Unlike its adversary, it strives to protect civilians and conduct the war in an ethical way. This sub-narrative redefines violence as a moral duty against the other side, which is able and willing to conduct terrible and immoral actions. It reframes reports of atrocities as outright lies and interprets civilian deaths as an unavoidable consequence of Ukrainian provocation and constructs the character of Russian soldiers as the symbol of virtue and civilized manners.

Russia's noble deeds and intentions

Sub-narrative 1) Russia only defends itself

¹⁴⁰ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 04.04.2022, 01:11:40 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-2-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-04-03-2022>, accessed on 28.10.2025

¹⁴¹ Channel One, Time Will Tell, 01.03.2022, 00:08:20 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-1-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-01-03-2022>, accessed on 28.10.2025

Sub-narrative 2) Russia seeks for peace

Sub-narrative 3) Russia the saviour of people in Ukraine

This reconstructed strategic narrative of the Kremlin was almost entirely missing from the performances of identified Western experts in the observed episodes of political talk shows. While this narrative was often used by the Kremlin's official talking heads (88 times), Western experts only used them twice, which marks a significant difference. Apparently, to convince Russian audiences on the just nature of the war using this narrative is not a task, and not the role of these expert characters. This, however, does not mean that they necessarily have challenged this strategic narrative, or any of the constituting sub-narratives, extensively used by other speakers in these talk show episodes.

The narrative and the constituting sub-narratives	References by Kremlin talking heads	References by Western experts
Russia's noble deeds and intentions	88	2
Russia only defends itself	23	2
Russia seeks for peace	24	
Russia the saviour of people in Ukraine	41	

Table 29. The comparison of the frequency of references between the identified Kremlin talking heads and the identified Western experts in the same examined talk shows on the same 114 days. The reference value for the narrative is the aggregate of the references with the sub-narratives constituting it.

Sub-narrative 1) Russia only defends itself

“Russia's security is resolved unilaterally. Only by Russia and no one else. That's why the answer lies only in Russia. Yes, they achieved it. They showed everyone that you shouldn't mess with Russia.”¹⁴²

This sub-narrative positions Russia as a peaceful and rational actor, which was forced to take defensive measures against Western aggression and gradual encirclement. The core

¹⁴² Channel One, Time Will Tell, 24.02.2022, 00:57:52 (Vladimir Sergienko), <https://www.1tv.ru/shows/vremya-pokazhet/vypuski/vremya-pokazhet-chast-6-specialnyy-vypusk-ot-24-02-2022>, accessed on 28.10.2025

logic behind Russia's actions is reactiveness. This framing liberates the Kremlin from the blame of starting a war and depicts it as a necessary response to existential threats which threaten Russia, and turn the aggression against Ukraine into the right, and responsible step to guarantee Russia's peace and security.

Sub-narrative 2) Russia seeks for peace

This sub-narrative was not used by Western experts in the observed talk shows in the examined period.

Sub-narrative 3) Russia the saviour of people in Ukraine

This sub-narrative was not used by Western experts in the observed talk shows in the examined period.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The dissertation intended to answer the research questions:

- 1) *Who are the Western experts in Russian political talk shows?*
- 2) *How do they convey the Kremlin's strategic narratives to Russian domestic audiences?*

Based on the research conducted above, we may conclude that Western experts were heavily and regularly featured in the examined Russian talk shows. In terms of methodology, three of the most watched Russian political talk shows were studied, based on the viewership data of Mediascope: 60 Minutes (*60 Минут*), Evening with Vladimir Solovyov (*Вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым*) and Time Will Tell (*Время покажет*). Each of these shows extensively features foreign policy related themes, hence, the assumption was that they would feature Western experts as well.

In terms of timing, to determine the days on which the coverage of three popular Russian political talk shows was analysed, a set of events was defined. 14 events were chosen, according to the hypothesis, that Western experts would be invited to these talk shows to narrate events which pertain to the West. Eight of these events were on foreseen, pre-planned dates (such as summits or elections in major Western countries). In these cases, 5 days before the event, the day of the event and the following 5 days were examined. The remaining 6 events were unforeseen by the public on these days the day's coverage and the following 5 days were examined. This means that talk shows of altogether 114 days were analysed for the participation of Western experts.

The Western experts, whose performances in political talk shows were identified according to an extensive list of keywords, for Western nationalities and institutions, and professions. The query of 291 combinations of these were run in Yandex along with the titles of the three selected political talk shows. This preliminary list of Western expert characters, who appeared in these shows constituted of 11 people. From then on, the

performances of these 11 people were monitored. On the examined 114 days, only 9 of the identified 11 were active in these shows.

The assumption that talks shows would extensively feature Western experts was fulfilled in the case of two talk shows from the three, however, 60 Minutes did not feature any of the identified Western experts on the examined 114 days. From the 114 days, they were featured on 26 in the Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, and on 79 on Time Will Tell. This means that on 23% of the examined days they appeared in the former, and 69% of the examined days on the latter. As Time Will Tell sometimes aired even six episodes on certain days, they were observed and counted as separate episodes. Sometimes Western experts appeared in several of them within a day. The highest number of appearances within a single day was produced by Vladimir Sergienko, who on 02 March 2022 appeared in 3 episodes of Time Will Tell. The programmes work with separate pools of Western expert characters with little overlap. In the programme Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, Alexandr Sosnovsky (Germany), Xavier Moreau (France) and Yakov Kedmi (Israel) were regular guests, while in Time Will Tell, Michael Bohm (USA), Gregor Spitzen (Germany), Jiří Just (Czechia) and John Varoli (USA). Vladimir Sergienko appeared in both. The most actively featured Western experts were associated with Western countries of major importance for Russia: to the USA (Michael Bohm) and Germany (Vladimir Sergienko and Alexandr Sosnovsky).

Country associated with	Name	Number of episodes featured in
USA	Michael Bohm	49
Germany	Vladimir Sergienko	27
Germany	Alexandr Sosnovsky	16
Israel	Yakov Kedmi	11
Czechia	Jiří Just	10
USA	John Varoli	7
Germany	Gregor Spitzen	5
France	Xavier Moreau	3
Poland	Jakub Korejba	1

Table 30. The number of episodes the observed Western experts appeared in the 114 examined days.

The analysis of their performances has shown that they fulfil different roles in these talk shows and are treated differently as well. The in-depth analysis of an episode with each of them has shown major dissimilarities in their behaviour, in the way they are treated by

the presenter and other guests, to what extent they are identified with the country they are associated with, and to what extent they identify with the country as well. Based on this analysis, 5 categories of Western experts in Russian political talk shows were created:

- 1) The punching bag (“the Westerner we can win over”) (Michael Bohm, USA)
- 2) A Russian with deep understanding of the West (a person of Russian origin presented as a Westerner, but not identifying with the country and behaving like any other Russian guest in the show) (Vladimir Sergienko, Germany; Alexandr Sosnovsky, Germany; Yakov Kedmi, Israel; Gregor Spitzen, Germany),
- 3) Somewhat unserious, but “smart Western guy” (Jiří Just, Czechia),
- 4) Westerner, who got on the right track (John Varoli, USA; Xavier Moreau, France),
- 5) Acknowledged adversary imperialist (Jakub Korejba, Poland).

The second category, “Russians with deep understanding of the West” further develops the work of Kecheng Fang (2022), who described using China as an example, how the centrally controlled media of authoritarian countries utilizes foreign experts to legitimise the ruling party and its policies for domestic audiences, performing external validation. This research has not only demonstrated that the Russian media does practice this too, but also developed further Fang’s concept, as it identified a set of experts used for the same purpose, in whose case even their foreignness is performative, as they are originally Russians.

I describe this phenomenon as *performative Westernness*, whereas these, originally Russian people are labelled as Western experts for domestic audiences, while they do not identify with the country they are labelled with; but behave, talk and are treated as Russians. Their main role is to transmit the Kremlin’s anti-Western narratives. Their association with a Western state serves predominantly to increase their credibility and add weight to their anti-Western claims. This research has identified four of such individuals, but that there are other known examples of this such as that of “Greg Vainer”, né Grigory Vinnikov (Zhegulev, 2017). This suggests that there might be many more of them. Their identification, the creation of their public persona and their perception among Russian target audiences would be of great interest.

The Kremlin's strategic narratives were reconstructed from the performances of four people, Vladimir Putin, Maria Zakharova, Margarita Simonyan and Dmitry Peskov, in the same three talk shows on the same 114 days, to make the comparison as methodologically founded as possible. Then, the identified Western experts' speeches were compared to these. In both cases, the English language transcript was used, extracted from the War of Words platform. English as the language of the transcripts was chosen due to the technical limitations of the NVivo software, which later was used for coding the textual corpuses. The Kremlin's strategic narratives were reconstructed by first inductively, thematically coding the textual corpus manually in NVivo as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), and applying the principles of narrative analysis as described by Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). The textual corpus containing the episodes where Western experts were featured was coded according to the same, already created codebook, introducing a few additional thematic codes where they were deemed necessary.

Nine strategic narratives were reconstructed, which constitute three major categories. These categories are the "Terrible Ukraine," "Glorious Russia," and anti-Western narratives. The following table shows how often they were used by the Kremlin's official talking heads and Western experts (Table 34). Looking at the major categories, to demonize Ukraine in the eye of the audiences of the observed talk shows, the Kremlin's official talking heads use two strategic narratives, out of which one lists events either not proven to be committed (the alleged 8 years of genocide prior to the invasion), or committed by Russia (the massacre in Bucha or exploding the Kakhovka dam), as crimes and provocations committed by Ukraine. This strategic narrative is less often used by Western experts than by official talking heads (10 vs. 25 times). The other anti-Ukrainian strategic narrative, which smears and criticizes Ukraine is recorded almost at the same volume in the case of Western experts, who predominantly criticize Ukraine for its politicians, in addition to the sub-narratives used by the Kremlin. Also, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky personally is a lot more smeared by Western experts, than by Kremlin officials (156 times vs. 24). The reason for this difference might be that the Kremlin's talking heads predominantly refer to the Ukrainian leadership as "the Kyiv regime". This is not alien from Western experts either, especially not from the ones of Russian origin, identifying rather with Russia. The act that Western experts criticize Zelensky's person in a more targeted and vocal way also allows the Kremlin's official

talking heads to seem more restrained and official in comparison. Anti-Ukrainian narratives are used almost to the same extent by both groups 94 references by Kremlin talking heads and 75 by Western experts.

The two strategic narratives constituting the major category “Glorious Russia”: “the glorious Russian army”, and “Russia’s noble deeds and intentions” were rarely used by Western experts. The difference is especially striking in the strategic narrative of “Russia’s noble deeds and intentions”, which consists of three sub-narratives justifying Russia’s invasion. These three sub-narratives frame the invasion as Russia’s self-defence, Russia as an actor seeking to establish peace, and Russia as the saviour of the people in Ukraine and were used 88 times by the Kremlin’s official talking heads, whereas only twice by any Western expert. Apparently, to reinforce the message that Russia’s invasion is just is not the role of Western experts. This, however, does not necessary mean that they would challenge such claims made by the presenter or other guests, they typically do not question them in any way.

The key role of these identified Western expert characters seems to be the justification, the amplification and the normalization of anti-Western narratives in these talk shows. Western narratives were used 227 times by the Kremlin’s talking heads, and 301 times by Western experts. The category of anti-Western narratives contains five identified strategic narrative, which are used to various extents. “The pitiful West” was used 7 times by the Kremlin’s officials and 93 times by Western experts. Western experts predominantly criticized Western countries for their dividedness and perceived weakness. The “hypocritical West” strategic narrative was more often used by the official rhetoric than by Western experts (88 vs. 67 times). However, some members of this latter group, especially the ones affiliated with Germany but of Russian origin and identification voiced significantly harsher accusations towards the West than the Kremlin’s official speakers themselves. For instance, while in the Kremlin’s official rhetoric, the West was only accused with supporting Nazis in Ukraine (19 times), Western experts accused Western countries to be Nazis themselves (14 times). This, for instance, is a prime example of the normalizing role of the Kremlin’s strategic narratives played by these Western experts, as they can make even wilder claims and statements than the Kremlin’s official talking heads, which, in comparison seem more restraint and moderate. Another major difference is that while the Kremlin’s narratives accusing the West with hypocrisy

tend to be of general or blurred nature, Western experts blamed the Western media explicitly in various forms 26 times. The fact that 6 of the 9 identified Western experts are introduced as journalists most likely lends such criticism extra credibility in the eyes of Russian audiences.

The strategic narrative centred around the West's hidden aggression was also more often used by Western experts than by the Kremlin's official talking heads (42 vs. 11 times). The Russophobia of Westerners is also mentioned more by the former group (19 vs. 6), and here the expert figures with German affiliation outperform the Kremlin's speakers again (19 vs. 6 references), mostly accusing Germany with it. The explicit description of the USA as an arrogant, money-hungry, power is a sub-narrative which is exempt from the Kremlin's speakers' observed performances but is traced 23 times by Western experts. The West's physical aggression was commonly mentioned by both groups (96 times by the Kremlin's rhetoric, 85 times by Western experts). This strategic narrative accuses the West of being the real warmonger (used 69 times by the Kremlin's rhetoric, 68 times by the expert figures), and within this category, Europeans especially being bloodthirsty and creating obstacles to peace. Blaming explicitly the Europeans for the war and its prolonging was more frequently heard from Western experts than from the Kremlin's official speakers (17 vs. 8 times). The Kremlin's strategic rhetoric criticizing Western sanctions was less frequently used by Western experts than the Kremlin's official speakers (14 vs. 25 times).

Strategic narratives		Number of references by the Kremlin's talking heads	Number of references by Western experts
Terrible Ukraine		94	75
	Cases for Ukraine's terror reign	25	10
	Terrible Ukraine	69	65
Glorious Russia		125	14
	The glorious Russian army	37	12
	Russia's noble deeds and intentions	88	2
Anti-Western narratives		227	301
	The pitiful West	7	93
	Hypocritical West	88	67
	The West's hidden aggression	11	42
	Physically aggressive West	96	85
	Western sanctions are bad	25	14

Table 31. The strategic narratives identified used by the Kremlin's talking heads and the identified Western expert characters. The major categories (coloured with dark grey) show the aggregate number of references where used.

Overall, based on the narrative analysis of the identified Western experts' performances in the three political talk shows on the examined 114, in comparison to the Kremlin's reconstructed strategic narratives voiced on the same days in the same three shows, the following conclusions can be drawn. The narratives used by Western experts align with the Kremlin's strategic narratives. In certain cases, they use different sub-narratives, but the overall message fits in the Kremlin's narrative frames perfectly. Moreover, their presence and verbal content justify, normalize and amplify the Kremlin's narratives and actions. In their talk show performances, they mostly criticize the West, and Ukraine. The open praising of Russian army is rare, apparently their main role is not this, but to discredit the West, and especially Western media. The identification of Western journalist in the case of 5 of these 9 people most likely enables this, as it can lend extra credibility to their related criticism in the eyes of the Russian audiences.

The open challenging of any of the Kremlin's strategic narratives is rare, and if it occurs, it usually happens as part of the performance, at the end of which the challenger is won over and discredited in the eyes of the audience. Prime examples for this choreography are the episodes featuring the American journalist Michael Bohm, who is the most

featured Western expert in these talk shows, and who is used as a punching bag according to the categorization established earlier based on the in-depth analysis of an episode for each expert figure. He might disagree to certain claims the presenters or guests make, but he cannot defend his own position convincingly (it would be rather difficult, as the entire environment and setup is unequal). Russian viewers, hence, can feel victorious over “winning over” an American repeatedly, implicitly proving that the Kremlin’s strategic narratives are the strongest and can be trusted.

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ANNEX I.

The combinations of key words used for finding Western experts commenting foreign policy related topics in Russian media:

Nationality (English)	Nationality (Russian)		Queries		
American	Американский		Американский журналист	Канадский журналист	
Austrian	Австрийский		эксперт	эксперт	
Belgian	Бельгийский		политический консультант	политический консультант	
British	Британский		политконсультант	политконсультант	
Bulgarian	Болгарский		аналитик	аналитик	
Canadian	Канадский		политолог	политолог	
Croatian	Хорватский		профессор	профессор	
Cypriot	Кипрский	киприотский	преподаватель	преподаватель	
Czech	Чешский		Австрийский журналист	Кипрский журналист	
Danish	Датский		эксперт	эксперт	
Dutch	Голландский	нидерландский	политический консультант	политический консультант	
English	Английский		политконсультант	политконсультант	
Estonian	Эстонский		аналитик	аналитик	
Finnish	Финский		политолог	политолог	
French	Французский		профессор	профессор	
German	Немецкий		преподаватель	преподаватель	
Greek	Греческий		Бельгийский журналист	Чешский журналист	
Hungarian	Венгерский		эксперт	эксперт	
Icelandic	Исландский		политический консультант	политический консультант	
Irish	Ирландский		политконсультант	политконсультант	
Italian	Итальянский		аналитик	аналитик	
Latvian	Латвийский		политолог	политолог	
From Liechtenstein	Лихтенштейнский		профессор	профессор	
Lithuanian	Литовский		Бельгийский преподаватель	преподаватель	
Luxembourgish	Люксембургский		журналист	Датский журналист	
Maltese	Мальтийский		эксперт	эксперт	
Norwegian	Норвежский		политический консультант	политический консультант	
Polish	Польский		политконсультант	политконсультант	
Portuguese	Португальский		аналитик	аналитик	
Romanian	Румынский		политолог	политолог	
Slovak	Словацкий		профессор	профессор	
Slovenian	Словенский		преподаватель	преподаватель	
Spanish	Испанский		Британский журналист	Голландский журналист	
Swedish	Шведский		эксперт	эксперт	
Swiss	Швейцарский		политический консультант	политический консультант	
			политконсультант	политконсультант	
			аналитик	аналитик	
			политолог	политолог	
			профессор	профессор	
			преподаватель	преподаватель	
Profession (English)	Profession (Russian)		Болгарский журналист	Английский журналист	
journalist	журналист		эксперт	эксперт	
expert	эксперт		политический консультант	политический консультант	
political advisor	политический консультант		политконсультант	политконсультант	
political advisor	политконсультант		аналитик	аналитик	
analyst	аналитик		политолог	политолог	
political scientist	политолог		профессор	профессор	
professor	профессор		преподаватель	преподаватель	
lecturer	преподаватель		Хорватский журналист	Эстонский журналист	
former advisor to NATO	бывший советник НАТО		эксперт	эксперт	
former employee of NATO	бывший сотрудник НАТО		политический консультант	политический консультант	
former colonel to the Turkish army	бывший полковник турецкой армии		политконсультант	политконсультант	
			аналитик	аналитик	
			политолог	политолог	
			профессор	профессор	
			преподаватель	преподаватель	

[illegible]

ANNEX II.

A non-comprehensible list of often used pejorative slang or slur terms in Russian political talk shows, and Russian propaganda in general (the author's non-comprehensive collection):

Slur Term in Russian	Country/Nationality used for	Explanation
Хохол / Хохлушка	Ukraine	A pejorative term for Ukrainians, which dates back to the Cossack hairstyle (the topknot)
Салоед	Ukraine	"Lard-eater," mocking stereotype of Ukrainians eating salo (a kind of bacon)
Бандеровец	Ukraine	Used to accuse Ukrainians of being "fascists," the followers of Stepan Bandera
Укры / Укропы	Ukraine	Sarcastic/neologistic slur; "Укроп" (dill) was reappropriated by Ukrainians at times
Чурка	Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan	Generic, extremely offensive ethnic slur for people from the Caucasus and Central Asia
Хачик / Хач	Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan	Very offensive, used broadly against Caucasian people
Грузинчик	Georgia	Diminutive, often condescending to Georgians
Армяшка	Armenia	Diminutive/slur, it is used dismissively
Азер	Azerbaijan	Condescending short form to Azeri people
Казахчонок	Kazakhstan	Diminutive, often used mockingly to Kazakhs
Гастарбайтер / Гастрик	Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova	Slur for labour migrants, it is heavily racialized
Обезьяна	Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan	"Monkey" – extremely racist
Молдаванчик	Moldova	Diminutive used pejoratively to Moldovans
Бульбаш	Belarus	"Potato-eater" – historically used in a mocking , rarely in an affectionate way
Прибалт	Baltics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia)	Neutral in form, but used strongly condescendingly in many political contexts
Фашист	Baltics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia)	"Fascist" – especially used in Kremlin propaganda to describe Baltic nationalists
Недостраны / Псевдогосударства	Baltics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia)	"Sub-states" / "Pseudo-states" – delegitimizing rhetoric
Пиндос	USA	Derogatory term for Americans, implying stupidity or clownishness

Грязный янки	USA	“Dirty Yankee”
Америкос	USA	Dismissive, mocking form
Сатана / Сатанисты	USA	Used in ideological and religious propaganda against the US
Англосакс / Англосаксы	UK	Used derogatorily in political discourse to imply imperialist scheming
Бриты / Бритиши	UK	Often dismissive
Мелкобритания	UK	“Small Britain” – sarcastic play on “Great Britain”
Лягушатник	France	“Frog-eater” – based on culinary stereotypes
Французик	France	Diminutive, often mocking
Фриц	Germany	WWII-era slur for Germans, still in use
Немчура	Germany	Pejorative/dismissive to Germans
Ганс / Гансик	Germany	Mocking a stereotypical German name
Пшек	Poland	Derogatory, based on Polish phonetics (“prze...”)
Польшаки	Poland	Dismissive slang to Poles
Шляхта	Poland	Ironically used, implying Polish elitism
Цыгане	Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary (and Romani)	“Gypsies” – sometimes applied to Hungarians/Roma people/Central Europeans
Крестьяне Европы	Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary	“Peasants of Europe” – condescending expression
НАТОшники	NATO members	Derogatory term for NATO members, implying puppets or aggressors
Гейропа	Western Countries (Europe)	“Gayrope” – Russian anti-Western term mocking liberal European values
Западники / Либерасты	Westernizers or liberal thinkers in Russia	Used to attack domestic supporters of Western values
Пятая колонна	Domestic supporters of Western values	“Fifth column” – used for domestic supporters of Western values

ANNEX III

The certified translator's certification on the validation of a 10 pages long sample of the English-language transcript compared to a Russian-language one.

Certification of Accuracy

This is to certify that it is a true and correct Russian into English translation of the document (Transcription of the part of television program "Vremya Pokazhet". Part 1. Episode from 04.07.2024)

August 16, 2026, I, ALLA KUIANOVA, DIRECTOR OF TRANSLATION AGENCY "ERIDAN - 2002", CERTIFY THAT THE REVIEW WAS MADE BY INTERPRETER KSENIIA NARINSKA, WHO HAS KNOWLEDGE OF ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES (Diploma KB № 43785145, issued on June 05, 2012 by "Kyiv Institute of Translators and Interpreters" LLC) AND THAT SHE IS COMPETENT TO TRANSLATE TO AND FROM THE SAID LANGUAGES. I DECLARE THAT, THE REVIEWED ENGLISH VERSION IS SUFFICIENTLY ACCURATE AND SUITABLE FOR THE STATED RESEARCH PURPOSES, PROVIDED THAT THE IDENTIFIED DISCREPANCIES ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT AND RELEVANT CODED OR CITED PASSAGES ARE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL RUSSIAN SOURCE WHERE NECESSARY.



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The detailed linguistic validation spreadsheet provided by the translator and the analysed sample can be accessed here: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12WYINy-foCc0uZxc5KMtMz2lRnTxi21u?usp=sharing>

ANNEX IV

The analysis of the performance of each identified Western expert in a chosen talk show episode:

Country associated with	USA	Germany	Germany	Czechia	Israel	USA	Germany	France	Poland
Name	Michael Bohm	Vladimir Sergienko	Alexander Sosnovsky	Jiří Just	Yakov Kedmi	John Varoli	Gregor Spitzen	Xavier Moreau	Jakub Korejba
Age at the beginning (ca.)	56	50	66	38	74	53	38	49	38
Year of birth	1965	1971	1955	1983	1947	1968	1983	1972	1985
Mother tongue Russian?	no	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	no
Treated as equal?	no	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Regularly interrupted?	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	no	no	yes
Laughed at?	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
Intonation/gestures of the presenter?	disdain	respect	respect	disdain	respect	respect	respect	respect	respect
Are they Identified with the country they are associated with?	Yes	No	No	yes	No	yes	No	yes	yes
Defensive/Aggressive (counterarguments, irony?)	yes	aggressive, blaming European politicians	aggressive, blaming European politicians	defensive	aggressive, blaming European politicians	aggressive, blaming European politicians	aggressive, blaming European politicians	aggressive, blaming European politicians and media	aggressive, blaming Russia
Moral position (values, laws) or "realist" language ("geopolitics, interests)	yes	values	realist	realist	realist	realist	realist	realist	realist
Adapting to the existing frames of the programme? (or breaking the rules?)	breaking	adapting	adapting	adapting	adapting	adapting	adapting	adapting	adapting

Agrees to/questions/tries to counterbalance typical propaganda bulletpoints 143	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is weak	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is hypocritical	agrees - the West is hypocritical	does not agree
(Whose face shown when debating, audience reactions such as booing, laughter, applause)	Showing the presenters and other guests' unimpressed face while he talks	him	him	him or others	him or others	him or others	him or others	him or others	him or others
Do they acknowledge that it is a propagandistic environment? Do they refer to their own "independence"? Depoliticizing rhetorics. ("all parties are to blame")	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Category	Punching bag	Russian, with deep knowledge on the West	Russian, with deep knowledge on the West	Somewhat unserious, but "smart guy"	Russian, with deep knowledge on the West	Westerner got on the right track	Correspondent	Westerner got on the right track	Acknowledged Polish imperialist

ANNEX V.

Codebook

Sub-narrative	Coding Rule
Cases for Ukraine's terror reign	Use when Ukraine is accused of deliberate violence or staged atrocities.
Uncivilized Ukraine	Use when Ukraine is described as lawless, fascist, or morally degraded.
Historical inferiority	Ukraine presented as backward or historically tainted.

¹⁴³ 1. The West is hypocritical, weak, decadent vs. Russia is strong, morally superior, realist 2. "double standards" 3. Russia only reacts/defends itself 4. civilizational narratives

Dangerous Ukrainians	Use for portrayals of Ukrainians as social/moral threats.
Zelensky	Use for marking any delegitimization of Zelensky's character or leadership.
The glorious Russian army	Use for portrayals of professionalism, responsibility, restraint related to the Russian armed forces.
The Russian army's noble moral values	Use for portrayals of moral purity, heroism, humanity related to the Russian armed forces.
Russia's noble deeds and intentions	Use for portrayals where Russia acts only defensively and seeks peace.
Western weapons end up in bad hands	Use for claims that Western aid strengthens criminals or terrorists which would backfire.
Culturally decaying West	Use for claims on the moral and cultural degeneration of Europe.
Ungrateful Europe	Use for Europe being portrayed as betraying Russia's goodwill.
West is weak, fragmented, or in economic decay	Use for portrayals of Western disunity and incompetence, or the lack of social resilience.
General hypocrisy	Use for Western double standards in moral or legal terms, or the difference pinpointed between claimed morals and actions.
Indifference to Ukraine	Use for claims on the West exploiting Ukraine without caring for it.
The West is Nazi	Use for claims of ideological continuity with fascism.
Outdated weapons	Use for statements on how the West provides obsolete or symbolic support.
Bad media	Use for claims on Western journalism framed as propaganda and hypocritical.
Western companies are terrible	Use for de portrayal of Western companies in Russia as predatory and immoral.
The West is Russophobic	Use for portrayals of systematic, irrational hatred of Russians.
Arrogant, money-hungry USA	Use for the portrayal of American hegemony as greedy and domineering.
Bloodthirsty Europeans	Use for portrayals of Europeans as warmongers who crave conflict.
West supports Nazis in Ukraine	Use for marking Western complicity in fascism.
Warmongering West	Use for the portrayal of Western policies driven by aggression, not peace.
Sanctions bad for the world	Use for descriptions of the sanctions as unjust and mistargeted, which harm the Global South and do damage worldwide.
Sanctions ineffective or ridiculous	Use for portrayals where sanctions have no impact or backfire to the West.
Sanctions immoral against long-suffered Russians	Used when sanctions are depicted to punish innocent or historically victimized Russians.

Unit of analysis	Coherent speaker intervention, or thematic passage.
Coding rule	Multiple coding is allowed, if a unit fulfils several narrative functions.

ANNEX VI

The robustness check's detailed material is available here:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1vsRqFAv8An_yQ9OW4jeqdnyfmgEEMMVQ?usp=drive_link